

Laura McPherson  
**A Grammar of Seenku**

# **Mouton Grammar Library**

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Laura McPherson

# **A Grammar of Seenku**

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In memory of Russ Schuh



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Figure 1.1: Used by permission, ©2003 SIL International, Map of the Samogho languages, further redistribution prohibited without permission.



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# Abbreviations

ANTIP	antipassive
CLF	classifier
CMPV	comparative
COMP	complementizer
COP	copula
DAT	dative
D.DEF	discourse definite
DEF	definite
DEM	demonstrative
EMPH	emphatic
EXCL	exclamative
FOC	focus
FR	French
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual
HUM	human
IDEO	ideophone
INDF	indefinite
INTENS	intensifier
INTERJ	interjection
IRR	irrealis
JU	Jula
LOC	locative
LOG	logophoric
NE	- <i>ŋé</i> (suffix associated with certain locatives)
NEG	negative
NOM	nominalized
PART	particle
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
PRES	presentative
PRF	perfect
PRO	pronoun
PROSP	prospective
PST	past
PTCP	participle
Q	question
REAL	realis
REC.PST	recent past
RECIP	reciprocal
RED	reduplicant
REL	relative
SBJV	subjunctive
SG	singular
SUBORD	subordinate
TOP	topic

**XX** — Abbreviations

TRANS    transitive

VOC        vocative

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Seenku

Seenku [ISO 639-3: sos] is a Mande language spoken by a population of around 16,000 people in southwestern Burkina Faso. It is also commonly referred to in the literature by its exonym, Sambla (variant French spelling Sembla), which is a Jula term for both the language and the ethnicity. Genetically, Seenku is said to belong to the Samogo group, which itself belongs to Northwestern (Kastenholz 1997) or Western (Vydrine 2009a; 2016) Mande. Only one other language in the group, Dzùùngoo (Solomiac 2007, 2014), has been the subject of a thorough reference grammar. The phonetics and phonology of Jowulu have been described (Djilla, Eenkhoorn, and Eenkhoorn-Pilon 2004), as has quantification in Bankagooma (Tröbs 2008), but the remaining Samogo languages Duungooma and Kpeego remain virtually unstudied. The greater Northwestern branch of Mande includes the more populous Bobo, Bozo, and Soninke language groups, with Bobo spoken in areas contiguous to Seenku territory. Non-Mande languages neighboring Seenku include the Toussian languages and Tiéfo, all early branches of Gur.

The whole southwestern region of Burkina Faso is linguistically dominated by Jula, a Mande lingua franca. Nearly everyone, including all but perhaps the oldest of Seenku speakers, are bilingual in Jula. It is used to communicate between ethnicities and is the most common vehicular language in the major urban area of Bobo-Dioulasso, where there is a large Sambla diaspora.

The name Seenku is a compound [sɛ́ɛ-kû], made up of *sɛ́ɛ*, the demonym of the people, and *kû*, meaning ‘language’ or ‘(abstract) thing’. In this grammar, I will use the term **Sambla** to refer to the people or the culture and **Seenku** to refer to the language itself. Though Sambla is an exonym, it is used by the community when referring to themselves in either French or Jula. While Coulibaly (1989) and Royer (1996) claim that the term is derogatory, I have not heard this sentiment echoed by any of my consultants. The literature typically uses the spelling *Seeku* to refer to the language, but this does not capture the phonemic nasalization of the first vowel; for this reason, I choose to write the name of the language as Seenku.

### 1.1.1 Geographic location

The Seenku-speaking zone is located to the west of the major city of Bobo-Dioulasso, at roughly 11°N and 5°W in the villages surrounding Karangasso-Sambla.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to be confused with another village close to Bobo-Dioulasso, Karangasso-Vigue, where the Gur language Vigue/Viemo is spoken.

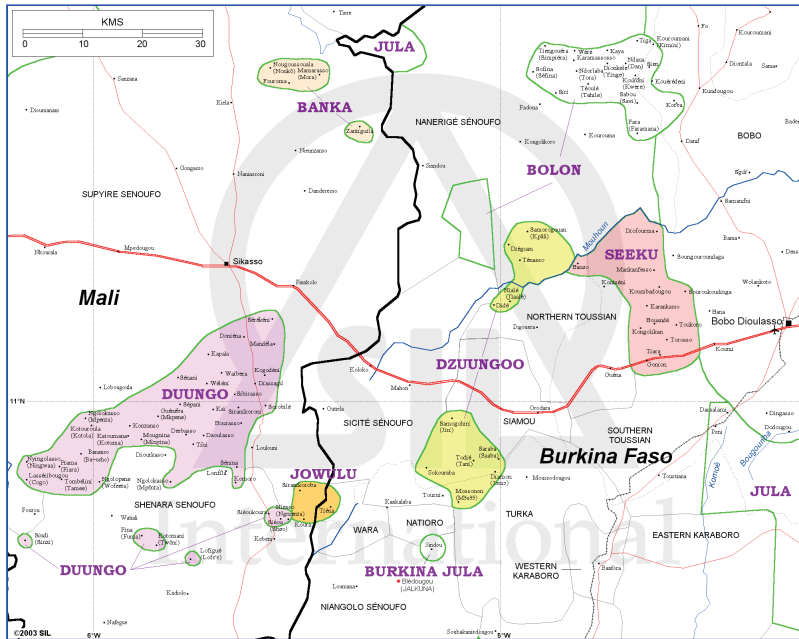


Fig. 1.1: SIL map of the distribution of Samogo languages. Used with permission.

The map in Figure 1.1 shows the Seenku-speaking zone in relation to the other languages in the area. Samogo language areas are shaded in (split across the Mali/Burkina Faso border), and other Mande languages are outlined (Jula, Bolon, Bobo, Jalkunan).

### 1.1.2 Sambla villages

I organized a GIS survey of Sambla country, carried out in 2018 by my assistants Minkailou Djiguiba and Sy Clement Traoré. GIS coordinates were gathered for 24 Sambla villages, along with basic information about their history, demographics, etc. The map in Figure 1.2 shows the results of this survey; the name on the top reflects the Seenku name for the village, while the corresponding Jula name is given in parentheses below.

Some of the villages, such as *Sio-gũ* or *Gbéncé-məgéeèwè*, are ethnically mixed, mostly with Mossi, Bobo, or Fulani families. The other ethnicities do not typically learn Seenku—instead, Jula is used, even with the Fulani or the Mossi, who also maintain their own languages (Fulfulde and Moore, respectively). Other villages consist of mostly Sambla griots, whether blacksmiths, musicians, or potters.

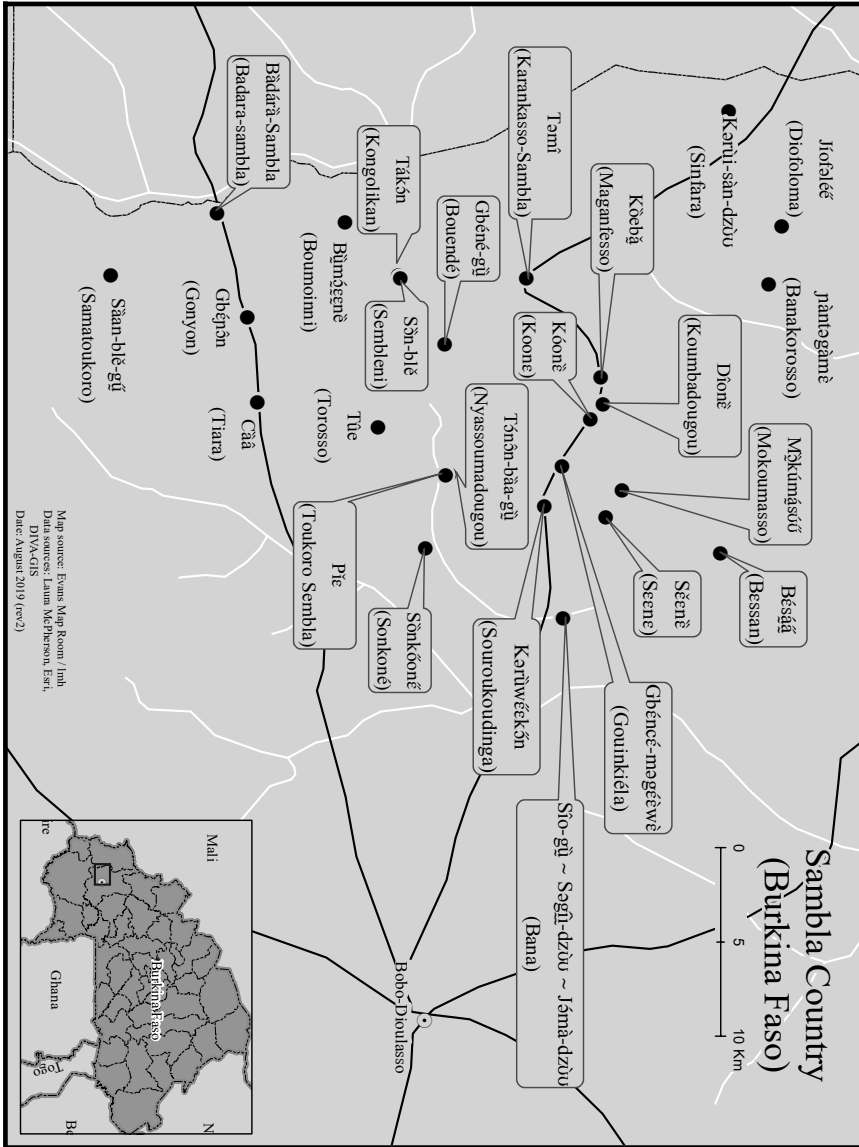


Fig. 1.2: Map of Sambla country, with village names in Seenku (and Jula)

### 1.1.3 Population

The population estimate of 16,000 is based on a 2009 UNSD survey cited by Lewis et al. (2016). Strand (2009) cites the population of the Sambla prefecture as 20,667 people, based on the 1996 Burkinabe census, but this number may include non-Sambla people living in the Sambla area (such as hamlets of ethnic Moore or Fula people) and it does not include ethnically Sambla people living outside of traditional Sambla country. It is unclear what proportion of the ethnic population speaks the language, especially in diaspora communities, or whether the population of speakers is increasing or decreasing. Recent unpublished sociolinguistic work by Rasmane Congo indicates severe linguistic attrition among the Sambla population in Ouagadougou, but the language is likelier to be more vital in Bobo-Dioulasso, given the close proximity to Sambla country and the frequency of movement back and forth between the two locales.

### 1.1.4 Dialects

There are two closely related dialects of Seenku, Northern and Southern. This grammar focuses on Southern Seenku, known also as *Gbéné-kû*, literally, ‘language of Bouendé’, as it is the dialect of the major village of Bouendé as well as the surrounding villages (Kongolikan, Sembieni, Toronso, Sɛɛɛ, Bana, Souroukoudingan, etc.), for a total of approximately 12,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2016). Northern Seenku, known also as *Təmi-kû*, literally, ‘language of Karangasso’, is spoken in Karangasso and Banakorosso (*ɲàntəgàmɛ̀*) by a total of approximately 5,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2016).

My consultants report perfect intelligibility between the two dialects, an assertion echoed by Prost (1971). My own investigations of Northern Seenku are preliminary, but what I have seen has been very similar to Southern Seenku, with just a few lexical differences and minor phonological differences. The following table gives examples of lexical differences between the two dialects:

**Tab. 1.1:** Lexical differences between Southern and Northern Seenku

<u>Southern</u>	<u>Northern</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
<i>bɛ̃ɛ</i>	<i>sā-bɛ̃ɛ</i>	‘pig’
<i>bðontô</i>	<i>bðolô</i>	‘youth’
<i>mɔ̃ɛn-dè</i>	<i>ɲmɛ̃ɛ-lè</i>	‘millet (grain)’

In addition, one consultant reports minor pronunciation differences in the village of Souroukoudingan (Seenku: *Kə̀rùwɛ̃kɔ̃n*). She specifically notes cases where a long

vowel in Bouendé corresponds to a VrV sequence in Souroukoudingan, e.g. ɡɔ̃ɔ (B) vs. ɡɔ̃ɔ̃ (S) ‘ground’. This may shed light on the development of long vowels in Seenku.

More careful dialect comparison must await future research.

### 1.1.5 Multilingualism

Nearly everyone in Sambla country is bilingual in Jula, with some rare exceptions among very old women. Those with formal education, especially younger people, also speak French. There is limited Fulani presence in Sambla country, but as is typical in this area of Burkina Faso, the Fulani speak Jula; Sambla people are unlikely to speak Ffulfulde. There is also a scattering of Mossi hamlets in the region, but the Sambla are unlikely to be bilingual in Moore, and the Mossi living in the area must communicate more broadly in Jula.

### 1.1.6 Vitality and domains of use

Seenku is currently being passed on to children in Sambla villages, where it is the language of daily life. However, families who move to Bobo-Dioulasso and especially Ouagadougou are increasingly likely to shift to Jula (even in Ouagadougou, where the majority lingua franca is Moore). I am told there has historically been social stigma attached to being Sambla (who were seen as manual laborers without much intellectual capacity), and as such, some people are hesitant to reveal their ethnic identity in Bobo-Dioulasso, adopting an urban identity instead. Other speakers, however, express great pride in being Sambla, so these value judgments could be changing.

In terms of its domains of use, Seenku is the language of the home and daily life in Sambla villages, except when interacting with non-Sambla people (locals of different ethnicities, visitors, etc.). There is no orthography for the language, and so there are no written documents, publications, or pedagogical materials; the language of education, even primary education, is French. Even in a private Facebook group for Sambla people, most posts are in French, though I have occasionally seen brief exchanges or comments in Seenku.

While French may be the threat to Seenku in written language, the more immediate threat in spoken communication comes from Jula. As noted above, every Sambla person that I know under the age of 50 speaks fluent Jula. Multilingualism is, of course, the norm in West Africa, but the equation is changing. Greater mobility, ease of communication with cell phones and mobile internet, and urban sprawl that brings the boundaries of Bobo-Dioulasso closer to Sambla country all contribute to an environment in which Jula becomes more socially and economically viable and Seenku loses ground. Even when speaking Seenku, code-switching into Jula is common, and a lot of original Seenku vocabulary has been lost to Jula loanwords, including grammatical

constructions like modals (see §19.3.1.2). In addition, many traditional oral genres are being lost, including riddles, folktales, and vocal music. There are many examples in the archived corpus where a speaker begins a narration and then doesn't remember how to finish it, or where a person does not remember more than one or two songs or stories.

These are troubling signs for the long term survival of the language.

### 1.1.7 Previous studies

The most in-depth work on Seenku prior to the current fieldwork is Prost (1971). This 70-page work describes Northern Seenku with a short grammar sketch, lexicon, and text. More recently, Congo (2013) wrote his master's thesis on Southern Seenku, focusing mostly on an accurate phonemic analysis of the dialect of Bouendé.

To my knowledge, this exhausts the previous work done on Seenku.

## 1.2 Sambla history, environment, and culture

### 1.2.1 History

Seenku is a member of the Samogo language group; the people speaking this original Samogo language are thought to have migrated to their present-day region between Sikasso, Mali and Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso from near the border with Guinea around 1500 CE (Person 1961, Royer 1996, as cited in Strand 2009). The region was likely inhabited already by different Gur ethnicities, such as the Tiéfo or the Toussian, who remain neighbors of the Sambla to this day. The Toussian and the Sambla especially share many cultural (and even linguistic) traits from centuries of close contact. Later Senufo migrations split the Samogo group into smaller populations, and the Samogo spoken by each population evolved into the distinct languages that are spoken today.

Before French colonization, the region was invaded by warring Jula clans, the Traoré and the Ouattara. The Traoré took over Sikasso and set up the Kingdom of Kenedougou, while the Ouattara took command of Bobo-Dioulasso. The local populations between the two regions were subjugated and found themselves used as pawns in the power struggle between these two clans (Royer 1996, Strand 2009). Sambla country itself ended up divided in these struggles; residents of Karangasso volunteered as warriors for the Ouattara, whereas residents of the southern villages resisted Jula rule and later French rule. Strand (2009) notes that even to this day there remains some latent animosity between northern and southern Sambla villages.

The French took over Sambla country in July of 1898 and placed it under the rule of the tyrant Si-Boro Traoré, who was responsible for changing many Sambla family names to Traoré (Royer 1996).

### 1.2.2 Environment

The Sambla region is characterized by rolling hills and low forest, filling out to a lush green in the rainy season and more arid for the rest of the year. Common tree species include baobab, mango, acacia, and shea. Forests are especially dense on the rolling hills surrounding the area, which are protected by the governmental agency *Eaux et Forêts*. The year can be divided into three main seasons: rainy season (late June through September, with a mini hot season near the end), cold season (October through February), and hot season (March through June). The climate is generally more temperate in all seasons than further north in Burkina Faso.

The Sambla are primarily agriculturalists, with staple crops of corn, millet, sorghum, and cotton. Shea butter production is also an important (and labor-intensive) activity for the women in the village. Many domestic animals are kept in the villages: chickens, ducks, pigs, guinea fowl, goats, sheep, with cows taken out to pasture by Sambla boys or by hired Fulani herders.

Karangasso is the administrative center in Sambla country, having had a governor or political chief established there by the colonial government, though Bouendé holds more traditional power (see Strand 2009). In terms of infrastructure, I arrived in the area in the summer of 2013 to find Karangasso with electricity and Bouendé in the process of having poles put up, though as of 2019, the funding has dried up and Bouendé's electricity lines still bring no current.

### 1.2.3 Culture

The three main religions in Sambla country are Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion. Churches, mosques, and fetishes can all be found in the villages, and my impression is that most Christians and Muslims still retain at least some degree of traditional religious practice. The production and consumption of millet beer is very common, particularly on market days. For a description of some of the Sambla's primary traditional cults, see Strand (2009).

The Sambla organize their society into roughly the same caste system as is common in Mande culture. The highest status caste are the *sáán* (Jula *horon*), who are landholders and farmers. Chiefs come from this caste. There is also a blacksmith caste, known as *cèe*, in addition to a griot (or 'musician-historian') caste, known as *jeli* in Jula and as *kâ* in Seenku. Among the griots, we find specific sub-castes, including leatherworkers *tsù-dagé-kâ* and balafon-playing griots *báq-bré-kâ*. The craft or pro-

fession (leatherworking, balafon playing, drum playing, etc.) is hereditary in these sub-caste families. Traditionally, there is no intermarriage between the *sáán* and the blacksmith or griot castes. The different lower classes, however, can intermarry.

In terms of family structure, it is not uncommon for a man to have two or more wives, though polygamy is less common among the Christian population. Extended families typically live together in a “compound”, consisting of several small houses, granaries, and other storage buildings around a large central courtyard. Modern houses are built rectangularly (a shape apparently imposed by the colonial government, Strand 2009:38) out of mud brick or cement, with corrugated tin rooves. Granaries are still built in a round form with pointed thatched rooves.

### 1.3 Fieldwork and methodology

The current volume is based on primary fieldwork on Southern Seenku carried out in Burkina Faso from January 2012 to the present with speakers from Bouendé, Torosso, and Sɛɛɛ. My primary consultants in Burkina Faso are a male speaker, Sy Clement Traore (SCT, born 1990) and a female speaker Gni Emma Traore (GET, born 1996), both from Bouendé. I have also benefitted from the help of Sambla consultants living outside of Burkina Faso, including another female speaker Gni Fatou Traore (GFT), originally from Sɛɛɛ and now living in New York, and the world-renowned balafonist Mamadou Diabate (MD), originally from Torosso but now living in Vienna. The text corpus represents the speech of over a dozen other Seenku speakers, mostly older, both male and female, representing the speech of Bouendé and Torosso. A couple of texts were collected with speakers of the northern dialect from Karangasso.

Most of this work has been financially supported by the National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages program, first with grant BCS-1263150 (PI Jeffrey Heath) and later by BCS-1664335 (PI McPherson). Additional funding has come from the Dartmouth College Office of the Provost, Dickey Center for International Understanding, and Leslie Center for the Humanities. The overarching goal of the project is to create a multi-purpose archive of Seenku speech and verbal art and produce descriptive materials, including the current volume.

Elicitation was carried out both in Burkina Faso and abroad; the bulk of elicitation was done at a project base in Bobo-Dioulasso. The contact language was French, and elicitation was largely done based on translation of words and phrases I devised, though ethnobiological elicitation was done using both field guides and specimens, and much of the modal data was elicited using a survey designed by Margit Bowler and John Gluckman. Over the years, most of my work with speakers has shifted from elicitation to text transcription and translation, using elicitation of sentences only to clarify constructions found in natural speech.

The examples in this grammar are drawn from both elicitation and texts. Where possible, I prioritize naturally occurring examples, except where either the form or

construction is unattested in the text corpus or where an elicited example illustrates the concept more clearly. All examples, whether elicited or naturally occurring, are tagged with a code that represents the recording they are drawn from, the format of which represents the date and whether the recording is elicited or textual. For instance, sos170714t1 represents the first text [t] recorded on July 14th, 2017, while sos150618e represents elicitation recordings from June 18th, 2015. A few rare cases do not have entries in the archive, as the data came from personal communication with consultants that may not have been recorded.

All cited recordings, including video of the narratives and texts, are archived at the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR), hosted at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. The URL for accessing these recordings is:

<https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1080582>

Nearly all of the “bundles” (files associated with a particular recording event) are unrestricted, meaning they can be freely accessed, listened to, or downloaded by anyone registered with ELAR (registration is free). A small number of more sensitive recordings are restricted, with permission required to access them. Elicitation bundles are accompanied by scans of the original field notes (meaning that the transcriptions in these notes may not reflect the final analysis of the language). Narrative or text bundles include both audio and video, as well as ELAN annotations for all of the texts cited in this grammar. Some of the ELAN annotations are fully glossed and translated, while others are transcriptions and translations into French created by GET; the transcription system in these files, noted in the archive, is not always consistent with the transcription system that I use. This text corpus contains a variety of genres, including riddles, folk tales, procedural videos (e.g. weaving, making shea butter), vocal music, balafon music, interviews, and conversation.

Examples from narratives used in the grammar are further tagged with the annotation number, e.g. sos170714t1:28, so that the example can be easily located in the ELAN file for those interested in looking further at its context. The goal of following this system of tagging and archiving is to promote transparency in the grammar—readers can access all of the original data and can evaluate the analyses for themselves. Grammatical description is always a work in progress; there is always more data to gather, more angles to consider, more comparisons to make. By providing the original data, I hope that others will find it easier to assess the description I give here and reanalyze or reinterpret patterns if new insights come to light.

Further, it should be noted that not all speakers agree on every term or construction. Disagreements are especially common based on age, with younger (and more urban) speakers offering examples that older speakers reject. I take this as evidence for language change and note such disagreements as they arise in the text.

All elicitation sessions were recorded in WAV format on either a Zoom H4n recorder or a Marantz PMD 661 MK11. Video was recorded using a Zoom Q8, Canon

Vixia, or Canon XA30 camcorder. A range of microphones were used on both audio and video recorders; details are provided in the metadata for each bundle in the archive. Phonetic analyses reported in this grammar were done in Praat. Data was first transcribed on paper in notebooks, then digitized (scanned and typed) for storage.

## 1.4 Organization of the grammar

The organization and layout of this grammar reflects my background and roots as a fieldworker—the structure largely follows that of my grammar of Tommo So (2013), a Dogon language. In writing that grammar, I drew on a grammatical outline created by Jeffrey Heath for Dogon languages, reflected in his grammar of Jamsay (2008). Where appropriate, I altered the internal structure of chapters or created new chapters to accommodate Seenku’s Mande grammatical structure.

There is of course a vast literature on Mande languages, replete with Mande-specific terminology. I make reference to some of that terminology (e.g. predicate markers, pre-verbs, *compacité tonale*) in this grammar for ease of comparison with other Mande languages, but I also endeavor to explain it in a way that will be accessible to a more general linguistic audience.

Otherwise, the terminology used in this grammar is meant to be relatively theory-neutral, adhering to what Haspelmath (2008) might call “Basic Linguistic Theory”. My own training is in generative linguistics, especially morphophonology, and so at times I might make suggestions as to how data could be interpreted from a generative perspective, but the description I have given here should be general enough to leave theoretical analysis up to the reader and his or her own theoretical persuasions.

For an overview of the topics in the grammar, see the next chapter.

## 2 Sketch of the grammar

This chapter serves as a preview and roadmap for the rest of the grammar. I summarize core grammatical structures and highlight particularly interesting or unique features of Seenku, all while providing cross-references to chapters later in the volume where the patterns are discussed at length.

### 2.1 Phonology

Seenku has undergone a lot of phonological reduction compared to more widely spoken Mande languages like Jula, or even closely related Samogo languages. The result is a largely mono- and sesquisyllabic lexicon. To ensure that contrasts can be maintained without the presence of multiple syllables, the phoneme inventory (segmental and tonal) has increased, and diphthongs are common.

#### 2.1.1 Segmental phonology

The consonant inventory consists of 20 core phonemes (and two more marginal ones, /p/ and /j/) across five places of articulation: bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar, and labiovelar. Among these 20 phonemes, Seenku displays the alveolar affricates /ts/ and /dz/, rare in Mande languages. The vowel inventory appears to be in a state of flux, with speakers showing either eight or nine phonemic oral vowels and five nasal vowels. The seven vowels /i e ε a ɔ o u/ are attested in all people's speech, suggesting a prototypically Mande seven-vowel system, but all speakers have an additional back vowel whose F1 is intermediate between /o/ and /ɔ/ but which patterns like a high vowel and sounds heavily pharyngealized; I treat this as [-ATR] /ʊ/. Some speakers additionally have the corresponding front vowel /ɪ/. For further discussion, see §3.1.1.1. Length is contrastive for all vowels. In addition to the monophthongs, Seenku uses a wide range of diphthongs (back-to-front and/or rising sonority). Interestingly, length is also contrastive for diphthongs due to the non-moraic nature of the diphthong-initial vowel quality (§3.1.2). See §3.1 and §3.2 for further discussion of consonant and vowel phonemes, respectively.

A unique feature of Seenku is its “sesquisyllabic” stem shape, a term coined by Matisoff (1990) and described more recently in Pittayaporn (2015). More commonly seen among Southeast Asian languages, sesquisyllabic words consist of a short half or minor syllable (Cə) before the full syllable, e.g. *mənɪ* ‘woman’, *təgɛ* ‘chicken’, etc. For a discussion of sesquisyllabicity and its underlying representation, see §3.3.1.2.

The only coda consonant Seenku allows is a non-contrastive coda nasal. The behavior of the final nasal is variable, raising the question of whether it should be treated

as a floating segment (as in Jowulu, Djilla et al. 2004, or Dzùùngoo, Solomiac 2014) or as a fully present coda in the underlying representation, no matter how weakly realized on the surface. See §3.3.2 for further discussion.

Some of the most prevalent segmental phonological rules include vowel hiatus resolution (§3.5.4), palatalization (§3.5.1.1), and affrication (§3.5.1.2).

### 2.1.2 Tonal phonology

Tone has a high functional load in Seenku, and the tone system is quite complex. There are four contrastive tonal primitives, which I call extra-low (X, à), low (L, à), high (H, á), and super-high (S, ǎ). The four tones are elegantly captured with a two feature system, with further evidence for tone features found in grammatical processes like plural and perfective formation; §4.1.1.1 discusses the feature system further.

These four tones can combine to create at least seven two-tone contours, some of which are attested lexically and others of which are purely morphological in nature. Three-tone contours, such as XHX, LSX, and HXS are also found.

If we could define a tone-bearing unit, we would have to say it is the syllable in Seenku, with each syllable able to host up to three tones. However, the interaction between tone and vowel length suggests a more phonetic timing-based approach (cf. Zhang 2004), where falling tones are found on short vowels, rising tones sometimes trigger lengthening of the vowel or simplification of the tone contour, and tritone contours obligatorily appear on long vowels (either underlying or lengthened on the surface); see §4.2.

Despite the complexity of the tone system, Seenku still displays downdrift and downstep, but only of S; all tones are, of course, subject to declination. Downstep and downdrift are discussed in §4.5.2 while declination is treated in §4.6.1.

A striking feature of Seenku tonology is its extensive system of argument-head tone sandhi, treated in §4.4.2. These paradigmatic tone changes take place in specific morphosyntactic configurations of a head (nominal, verbal, or postpositional) and its internal argument, and interact with other tonal processes like plural formation in interesting ways. Sandhi patterns differ from tonal changes in compound nouns. Either of these sets of tone changes may be seen as Seenku's version of Mande "tonal compactness" or *compacité tonale* (Creissels 1978, with various Mande patterns recently summarized by Green 2018 who redefines the phenomenon as replacive tone). Compound tonology is discussed in §7.1.1.2.

## 2.2 Nominal and adjectival morphology

### 2.2.1 Nominal morphology

Nouns do not carry much morphology. As is typical for Mande languages (but not Niger-Congo more broadly), Seenku lacks noun classes. The only inflectional morphology on nouns is the plural, marked by a combination of vowel fronting and tone raising (§5.3); in a few human nouns, exceptional singular and/or plural suffixes are used. There is no affixal definite marking, segmental or tonal. However, for a discussion of incipient case marking on pronouns, see §6.6. Derivational morphology is more common, particularly compounding (treated in Chapter 7). In some cases, it is unclear whether a morpheme is an affix or compounded stem. For example, the nominalizing morpheme *-bé*, found in forms like *néřémǎn-bé* ‘stupidity’ (cf. *néřémǎn* ‘stupid’) could be a simple affix or it could be a nominalized form of the root *bè* ‘do’. To my knowledge, there is no interclass derivational morphology.

### 2.2.2 Adjectival morphology

Adjectives differ from nouns in their plural inflection, which involves initial CV reduplication in addition to the vocalic and tonal changes; in a N+Adj sequence, plural marking can occur on both the noun and the adjective or on just the adjective. Deadjectival nouns are derived using the *-bé* suffix/morpheme discussed above. Comparative constructions are analytical, involving no morphological marking on the adjective. For further discussion of adjectival morphology, see §8.3.2.

## 2.3 Noun phrase structure

The maximal noun phrase in Seenku is made up of the following elements, roughly in order (though some variation is attested):

- (1) a. (discourse) definite, indefinite determiner, or possessor
- b. noun
- c. adjective
- d. numeral
- e. demonstrative or indefinite determiner
- f. non-numeral quantifier

For example:

- (2) a. *móò*            *bì*            *ké-kě*            *sùε*  
 1SG.EMPH.DAT goat.PL RED-white.PL three  
 ‘my three white goats’
- b. *à*    *bî*    *dèn*    *sóen lé*  
 DEF goat CLASS one DEM  
 ‘this one goat’

Determiners are a particularly interesting topic in Seenku, both for their distribution and their phonological effects. The discourse definite, for instance, triggers argument-head tone sandhi and must obligatorily co-occur with a demonstrative. The definite, on the other hand, can occur on its own and does not interact tonally with the noun. For further discussion, see §8.2.

Possession is also of interest in the construction of noun phrases. Seenku has two possessive patterns, alienable and inalienable. Inalienable possession involves direct juxtaposition of the possessor and the possessed noun, which undergoes complex tone sandhi alternations triggered by the tone of the possessor. Alienable possession involves an explicit genitive or dative marker between the possessor and the possessed noun, with no tonal interaction between the two. However, this dative marker can be absorbed into the preceding pronoun, as in (2a), in which case the alienable possessor behaves like an inalienable possessor in triggering argument-head tone sandhi. See §8.6.2.3 for more.

## 2.4 Anaphora

Pronouns and anaphora in Seenku show a typical Mande or West African range: three persons are distinguished, along with a binary distinction between singular and plural. Gender is not a grammatical category, meaning 3sg *à* could refer to a male or female referent; there is likewise no animacy marking, and so *à* could mean ‘it’ as well. The only divergence from a basic six-pronoun system is the presence of what appears to be an inclusive vs. exclusive distinction in the 1pl, with exclusive *íwí* and inclusive *mí*. The noun *mɔ̀* ‘person’ can also be used as a pronoun, meaning either a generic pronoun like ‘one’ or a 1pl, as we see in French with *on*. See §6.1 for description of the pronominal categories.

In addition to the basic pronouns, there is a pronoun *í* which I describe as logophoric. Its distribution is similar to pronouns in other Mande languages, such as Boko (Jones 2000), meaning it is found both in traditional logophoric contexts (in a complement clause co-referent with the thinker or speaker of the main clause) as well as reflexive and reciprocal contexts. It too shows limited subject agreement, with *ń* used for the 1sg and *í* found in all other contexts. See §6.7.

## 2.5 Verbal morphology

### 2.5.1 Verbal derivation

As with nouns, derivational morphology is sparse with verbs in Seenku; expressions like the causative or benefactive are expressed analytically as opposed to morphologically. Nevertheless, we find two kinds of explicit derivational marking, both of which raise interesting questions of representation and interpretation.

The first is an antipassive suffix, which sometimes surfaces as what appears to be an infix. It suppresses the patient role of a transitive verb, rendering it intransitive in canonical cases. However, many of these antipassive verbs can continue to take a patient (i.e. be used transitively), but with a modified semantics where the VP takes on a partitive meaning (e.g. *bí sʷɔ* ‘sell goats’ vs. *bí síʷɛɛ* ‘sell (antip.) some of the goats’). Antipassives are treated in §12.3.

The other derivational data pattern is the use of so-called “pre-verbs” (Keita 1989, Vydrine 2009b, Khachaturyan 2017, etc.), (at least) diachronically related to nouns or postpositions that group phonologically with the preceding object but syntactically form a compound with the following verb. Three postpositional pre-verbs are attested: *wɛ̀-* (from the associative), *nɛ̀-* (from the locative), and *lɛ̀-* (from the dative), though there is little in the way of consistent semantics for the use of each one. Certain inalienable nouns like *kɔ̀n* ‘head’ or *dzɔ̀* ‘mouth’ are also found in these compound verbs. See §12.4 for further discussion.

### 2.5.2 Verbal inflection

Verb stems in Seenku inflect for two categories: reality status (irrealis vs. realis) and aspect. There is no participant agreement, and tense and negation are (except in irregular cases) indicated through the use of post-subject markers (see below) or particles.

Realis verb stems often involve a high vowel infix before the syllable nucleus, creating a diphthong and sometimes triggering palatalization or affrication. For example: irrealis *tʷ* vs. realis *tsiʷ*. The realis is used in the perfect, perfective, progressive, immediate past, and conditional. In contrast, the irrealis consists of the bare verb stem, though with transitive verbs, it undergoes argument-head tone sandhi with the direct object; the realis verb stem, despite following the same word order, shows no tonal interactions. The irrealis is used in the prospective, the imperative, the habitual, and in subordinate clauses like purposives. For more on realis and irrealis verb stems, see §13.1.

Some aspects are marked with only grammatical tone, such as the perfective (marked by tone lowering) and the perfect (marked with a -SX contour suffix); others, like the habitual or the progressive, are marked with verbal particles homophonous

with postpositions; still others, like the prospective or the imperative, are bare. Verbal inflection is treated in great depth in Chapter 13.

## 2.6 Main clauses and constituent order

### 2.6.1 Word order

Seenku has a typical rigid Mande word order:

- (3) Subject - TAMP - Auxiliary - Object - Verb - PP/Adjunct - Negation

Only one object, the internal object, can appear before the verb; any indirect objects must appear with a postposition after the verb. The one exception to this word order is that certain adverbs, such as *kərɔ* ‘yesterday’, can appear clause-initially.

There are no word order changes to be found, e.g. in subordinate clauses or due to focus or topicalization.

### 2.6.2 TAMP markers

A typical feature of Mande languages is the presence of grammatical particles after the subject that indicate tense, mood, or other grammatical functions (see e.g. Tröbs 2003). These go by many names in the literature on Mande languages. The term “predicate marker” or “predicative marker” is common in Mandeist literature (e.g. Bearth 1995, Babaev 2011), but they are also referred to as post-subject markers (e.g. Babaev 2010), auxiliaries (e.g. Kastenzholz 2003), or TAMP markers (e.g. Idiatov 2016). I will follow this last naming convention, as it is the most neutral and likely to be understood outside of the Mandeist tradition, though it should be noted that in Seenku, they do not mark aspect.

TAMP markers are not as varied in Seenku as they are in some other Mande languages (such as Jula), but a few are attested, listed below with their cross-references:

- Past tense *lɛ́* (§13.4)
- Subordinate *wɛ̀/lɛ̀* (Chapter 17, §19.3, §20.2)
- Subjunctive *lé* (§18.1, §19.3)

The subordinate marker has two forms, *lɛ̀* and *wɛ̀*. The /l/-initial form *lɛ̀* is found marking the subject of relative clauses, while either *lɛ̀* or *wɛ̀* can be found in certain complement clauses and in clause chaining. Similarly, the subjunctive marker is found in all conditional clauses as well as some complement clauses.

In every case, the segmental material of the TAMP markers can elide, leaving behind only their tone and a mora, which dock to the preceding subject. For instance, the past tense marker following the 1sg could be pronounced as either *mó lɛ́* or *móó*;

/l/- and /w/-initial postpositions follow the same process of elision, but in addition undergo tone sandhi, while TAMP markers remain tonally inert. See §4.4.3 for further discussion of elision.

I treat TAMP markers as distinct from auxiliaries, such as the prospective *nǎ*, the progressive *sĩ* ‘be’, or the immediate past *s’o*. The two can co-occur, always in the order TAMP Aux.

### 2.6.3 Negation

Negation in Seenku is of interest in that it follows the areal pattern of clause-final marking (Dryer 2009, Idiatov 2015), with the negative particle *ηέ*. Even when a clause is complicated with an embedded subordinate clause, negation still is marked at the end of the whole thing, i.e. **after** the embedded clause. For instance:

- (4) *mó lǎ ná à nɛ̀ à nǎ nɛ̀ ηέ*  
 1SG.EMPH believe.PTCP be.NEG 3SG LOC 3SG PROSP come.IRR NEG  
 ‘I don’t think that he will come.’ [sos170811e]

The clause-final negative marker *ηέ* belongs to the initial matrix clause, as can be discerned by the use of the irregular negative verb *ná*; in other words, this phrase does not translate as “I believe he won’t come”. See §13.5 for an overview of negation and §19.2.2 for more examples of negation in complex clauses.

## 2.7 Relative clauses

Seenku displays head-internal relative clauses; like Bambara (Bird 1968) and many other Mande languages, these clauses are typically left-peripheral and resumed by a discourse definite pronoun *kó* in the main clause; they can also appear after the main clause, with a relative pronoun coreferent with the head that appears in the main clause. The head of the relative clause is followed by the *wh*-relativizer *lé* (see §16.2.1 for treatment of *lé* as a *wh*-word), and the subject is followed by the subordinate TAMP marker *lɛ̀*; if the subject is the head of the relative clause, the two occur in the order REL SUBORDINATE (*lé lɛ̀*). There is no special verbal morphology associated with relative clauses.

The subordinate marker shows interesting behavior with respect to auxiliaries. Typically, other TAMP markers like the past or the subjunctive co-occur with auxiliaries and precede them. In relative clauses, the subordinate marker follows the prospective auxiliary (§17.1.1), blocks the appearance of the affirmative progressive auxiliary *sĩ* ‘be’, and is blocked by the negative progressive auxiliary *ná* (§17.1.3).

Whenever the subject of a relative clause is a noun, it is followed by a resumptive pronoun; both the noun and pronoun are followed by the subordinate predicate marker.

For further discussion of relative clauses, see Chapter 17.

## 2.8 Complement clauses

Seenku has three complementization strategies. The first is to use an overt complementizer, found in expressions of saying, knowing, or thinking. The most interesting aspect of these constructions is that Seenku shows limited complementizer agreement, whereby the complementizer agrees with the subject of the matrix clause. There is a two-way distinction between *né* for the 1sg and *ɨ* for every other person-number combination; see §19.1 for further discussion.

The other complementization strategy is to juxtapose the complement clause to the end of the matrix clause with no complementizer; the subordination of the complement clause is shown by the use of either the subjunctive or the subordinate TAMP markers. In some complement clauses, the subjunctive is used regardless of tense/aspect, while with other verbs, past and perfective aspects are correlated with the use of the subordinate rather than the subjunctive. See §19.3.

Finally, some verbs take nominalized complement clauses; these constructions are discussed in §19.4.

## 2.9 Clause chaining and event sequencing

In narratives, Seenku displays the phenomenon of clause chaining—sequences of foregrounded subordinate clauses introduced by a single main clause establishing the background. There may be incipient same subject marking on the subordinate TAMP marker for 3sg subjects; see §20.2.

Otherwise, Seenku displays a few temporal subordination strategies, which can involve the conditional construction, verbal reduplication, or an explicit ‘before’ construction; these constructions are treated further in §20.3.

## 2.10 Artistic adaptation

A peculiar feature of this grammar is the inclusion of a chapter on artistic adaptation. I have chosen to include this topic given the presence of a fascinating surrogate language system, particularly on the balafon, a kind of resonator xylophone: anything in Seenku can be “spoken” musically by encoding the tone and rhythm of the language on the instrument. In addition, vocal music in Seenku is tightly constrained by the lan-

guage's tone system, and these melodies are fed back to instrumental music, creating two styles of musical language. See Chapter 22 for discussion.

## 3 Segmental phonology

This chapter focuses on the segmental phonology of Seenku; for tonal phonology, see Chapter 4. I begin with phoneme inventories, first of vowels (§3.1) and then of consonants (§3.2). The discussion then turns to syllable structure and phonotactics (§3.3) and then to a brief discussion on word structure (§3.4), which in most cases is the same as syllable structure, given the largely mono- and sesquisyllabic nature of Seenku vocabulary. Finally, I address phonological rules and processes in §3.5 before a brief discussion of phonological phrasing in §3.6.

### 3.1 Vowels

Between contrastive length and nasalization and a wide array of diphthongs, Seenku has a very large vowel inventory. I divide the discussion of the vowels into monophthongs (§3.1.1) and diphthongs (§3.1.2), with questions of inventory and acoustics discussed in each. Minimal pairs are addressed separately in §3.1.4, which includes both monophthongs and diphthongs.

#### 3.1.1 Monophthongs

##### 3.1.1.1 Oral vowels

Determining the number of phonemic vowel qualities in Seenku has proven to be a surprisingly difficult task. At first, the language appears to be a typical West African seven vowel system for the oral vowel qualities, with a two-way height or ATR contrast in the mid vowels: /e, ε, o, ɔ/. However, a handful of lexical items introduce a third category that falls acoustically between the regular categories in terms of F1 (height). It often has a pharyngealized quality to it, suggesting retracted tongue root, though this would benefit from articulatory study. The situation appears to be in a state of flux, with differences between speakers. For instance, while most speakers display the third category in back vowels, some speakers appear to have only the two-way contrast in front vowels.

Given this, there is no obvious way in which to transcribe the third category. If the system is basically a seven vowel system, then it makes sense to treat the more common and more stable categories as /o, ɔ/, which to my ear matches their acoustics. But if this is the case, then there is no prototypical vowel in the IPA that falls between the two in terms of height. Given the pharyngealized quality of the third category and its variable triggering of palatalization (§3.5.1.1), I hypothesize that these are [-ATR] high vowels, with extreme raising of F1 due to the retracted tongue root. As such, I will transcribe these vowels as /ɪ/ and /ʊ/.

It is unclear whether the mysterious third category is an innovation or archaic feature in Seenku. As a Western Mande language, we would expect a seven vowel system in Seenku (Vydrine 2004), but nine vowel systems are attested in Southern Mande, and Le Saout (1979) considers these to be the most archaic, with other vowel systems neutralizing these contrasts. It seems unlikely that just a single Western Mande language would retain a trace of this older archaic system, leading me to believe that these are remnants of some other contrast in Seenku, possibly diphthongs that have monophthongized or a phonologized effect of a consonant that has since been lost. An example of a four-way (near) minimal pair for the back vowel series is shown in (1):

- (1) *kû* ‘thing’  
*kÿ* ‘toh (staple grain paste)’  
*kö* ‘rock hyrax’  
*(ä) kÿ* ‘(his) bone’

Note that I have only ever heard short [-ATR] high vowels.

With this in mind, the inventory of oral vowels, short and long, is shown in Table 3.1, with each vowel exemplified; minimal pairs will be provided in §3.1.4.

**Tab. 3.1:** Seenku oral monophthong inventory

Short		Long	
i	<i>bî</i> ‘goat’	ii	<i>tîi</i> ‘accept’
(i)	<i>kí</i> (past tense copula)		
e	<i>mèlè</i> ‘hot pepper’	ee	<i>cabèe</i> ‘shea nut’
ε	<i>bè</i> ‘do (irrealis)’	εε	<i>bèε</i> ‘pig’
a	<i>kâ</i> ‘yam’	aa	<i>kâa</i> ‘fight’
ɔ	<i>(ä) kÿ</i> ‘(his) bone’	ɔɔ	<i>kÿɔ</i> ‘hole’
o	<i>(ä) tō</i> ‘(his) testicle’	oo	<i>(ä) tōo</i> ‘(his) ear’
ɔ̄	<i>jō̄</i> ‘water’		
u	<i>kərù</i> ‘hyena’	uu	<i>kərúu</i> ‘all’

Short oral vowels have an inventory of 8-9 vowels, depending on the speaker; some speakers have merged /ɪ/ and /ε/ (recall that /ɪ/ is acoustically intermediate between /e/ and /ε/ in terms of F1/F2). Long oral vowels show only the basic 7-way contrast, with the loss of [-ATR] high vowels.

Long vowels are almost exactly twice as long as short vowels on average. In a phonetic comparison of 64 short vowel tokens in a frame sentence and 54 long vowels, short vowels had an average duration of 111ms, while long vowels had an average duration of 225ms.

I assume the feature inventory in Table 3.2 to account for the vowels of Seenku. The role of this feature inventory in plural formation will be discussed in §5.3.1.2.

Tab. 3.2: Seenku vowel features

	i	e	ɛ	a	ɔ	o	ʊ	u
[front]	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
[back]	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	+
[high]	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	+
[low]	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
[ATR]	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	+

For acoustic F1\*F2 plots of the vowel qualities (both oral and nasal), see §3.1.1.3.

### 3.1.1.2 Nasal vowels

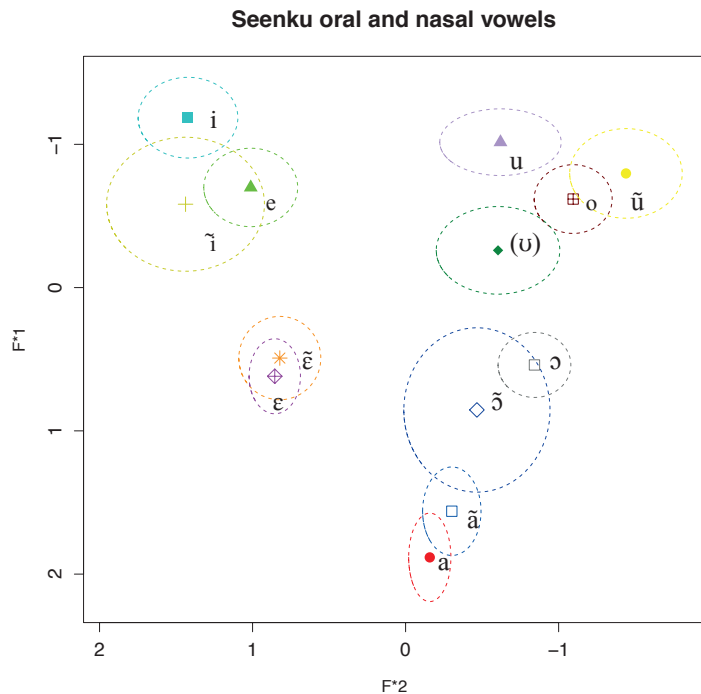
Like many languages, Seenku has a reduced set of nasal vowel qualities; specifically, ATR distinctions in high and mid vowels are neutralized, leaving just five nasal vowel qualities. Length is contrastive for nasal vowels as well, and while in principle all five could be long, only three of the five possible long vowels are attested in the data.

Tab. 3.3: Seenku nasal monophthong inventory

Short		Long	
ĩ	<i>bj'</i> 'horns'	ĩĩ	<i>tərjĩ'</i> 'cut (antipassive)'
ɛ̃	<i>dɛ̃'</i> 'walls'	ɛ̃ɛ̃	<i>tɛ̃ɛ̃'</i> 'hunt'
ã	<i>bã'</i> 'hit'	ãã	<i>bãã'</i> 'balafon'
ɔ̃	<i>fəɔ̃'</i> 'monkey'	(ɔ̃ɔ̃)	
ũ	<i>bũ'</i> 'grass'	(ũũ)	

### 3.1.1.3 Vowel acoustics

To plot the acoustics of Seenku's monophthongs, I compiled a list of nine lexical items for each vowel quality, collapsing the distinction between short and long vowels (for which there are no audible quality differences). Two speakers of Seenku, one male and one female, embedded each item in a frame sentence (*mó* \_\_\_ *sɔ́* 'I bought \_\_\_' for nouns and \_\_\_ *sã̀sã̀a nɛ̀* 'do \_\_\_ now' for verbs), repeating each three times for a total of 27 tokens of each quality. Formant values were extracted from the recordings using a Praat script, with outliers rechecked and corrected by hand. The resulting acoustic information was normalized and plotted using NORM vowel normalization and plotting suite (<http://lingtools.uoregon.edu/norm/index.php>). The results are shown in Figure 3.1. Unfortunately the two speakers who recorded this list—both younger speakers from central Bouendé—do not have the vowel /ɪ/ as part of their inventory, and thus the chart contains only the [-ATR] high back vowel /ʊ/.



**Fig. 3.1:** Normalized F1\*F2 plot for two speakers

This plot demonstrates the position of /ʊ/ between /o/ and /ɔ/ in terms of height, though the high series /u, ʊ/ is slightly more centralized than the mid series /o, ɔ/. The nasal vowels are interesting in that the high nasal vowels /ĩ/ and /ũ/ (using IPA conventions for nasalization here as opposed to the tilde below the vowel, as I use in most transcriptions) are acoustically quite close to /e/ and /o/; thus, while we can say that the distinction between mid vowels is neutralized in the nasal series, from an acoustic standpoint it seems possible that the height distinction between [+ATR] vowels is neutralized instead. In fact, we find alternations between /e/ and /ĩ/, such as *dên* ‘grain’ and *dĩ* ‘grains’, where the latent nasal coda is realized as vowel nasalization in the plural. See §3.3.2 for further discussion of nasal codas and §5.3.1.3 for nasal alternations in plurals.

### 3.1.2 Diphthongs

Seenku also has around a dozen diphthongs, all of which are either rising sonority (moving from a higher vowel to a lower vowel) or level sonority (moving from a back vowel to a front vowel). Many diphthongs are created through morphological pro-

cesses like plural formation (§5.3.1) or realis formation (§13.1), though they are also found lexically. Oral diphthongs are shown in Table 3.4, nasal diphthongs in Table 3.5.

**Tab. 3.4:** Seenku oral diphthong inventory

	ui		
ie	ue	oe	
iɛ	uɛ		ɔɛ
io	uo		
iɔ	uɔ		
ia	ua	(ʊa)	

**Tab. 3.5:** Seenku nasal diphthong inventory

	ɥi		
iɛ̃	uɛ̃		ɔɛ̃
iɔ̃	uɔ̃		
iã			

From a phonetic standpoint, the two elements are not on equal footing. The initial element behaves like an onglide, which I take phonologically to be a non-moraic vowel, while the second element has a duration similar to monophthongs. Because the initial vowel is non-moraic, diphthongs may also be either short or long without creating superheavy syllables.

Given that the majority of diphthongs begin with either /i/ or /u/, we may also ask whether we are dealing with diphthongs at all, or whether instead Seenku should be analyzed as having secondary palatal and labial articulation on consonants. This is the analytical route taken in Djilla et al. (2004) for related Samogo language Jowulu. The distinction between [oe] and [ue] or [ɔɛ] and [uɛ], though, point to diphthongs as the most natural explanation, since it allows the glide-like quality to retain its full set of vocalic features.

We can make a few observations about the diphthong inventory in Seenku. First, back-to-front diphthongs are attested while front-to-back (excluding /a/) are not; thus, we find no \*iu, \*eo, \*ɛɔ, etc. Second, back-to-front diphthongs are harmonic for [ATR]. While /oe/, /ɔɛ/ are attested, \*oe or \*ɔe are not. High and low vowels are neutral and may combine freely. The diphthong /ʊa/ is in parentheses, as it is only attested in one morpheme, /súaa/ ‘path, way’ (in compounds like /ɲəmá-súaa/ ‘blood vessel’); palatalization of /s/ to [ʃ] ([ʃúaa]) points to the [-ATR] high vowel rather than /ɔ/, though this is the only case in which we find this category involved in diphthongs.

Due to the absence of [+ATR] nasal vowels, the inventory of nasal diphthongs is also smaller.

As stated above, diphthongs may also be either short or long, with the length contrast carried by the second element. Because of the onglide portion, the overall duration of diphthongs is longer than their corresponding monophthongs, 135ms for short diphthongs and 263ms for long diphthongs.

### 3.1.3 The status of schwa

There is some question of how to treat a surface vowel schwa [ə] in the phonology of Seenku. As will be discussed in §3.3, a large portion of the Seenku lexicon is best classified as **sesquisyllabic** (Matisoff 1990, Pittayaporn 2015), a short half syllable containing a non-contrastive vowel [ə] followed by a full syllable containing one of the vowel phonemes described above. This non-contrastive vowel does not carry its own tonal specification, instead receiving pitch either from the full syllable to the right, in the case of mono- or bitonal melodies, or by hosting the first of the three tones in a tritonal word. Examples of such sesquisyllabic words include:

- (2) a. *səmâ*        ‘dance’  
       b. *nəgì*        ‘cow’  
       c. *məní*        ‘woman’

The duration of this vowel is on average only 42ms, compared to 111ms for short vowels (see §3.1.1 above).

The exact quality of the vowel depends on its consonantal context and the following vowel. When it is adjacent to a palatal consonant, its realization is closer to [i] than to schwa, as in [jibé] ‘clothing’ or [ɲigâa] ‘guinea fowl’; when adjacent to a velar consonant followed by a back round vowel, its realization is closer to [u], as in [dugɔ̃ɔ] ‘place’. However, these qualities are not contrastive. Between a velar stop and [r], it is typically realized as a high round vowel agreeing in [ATR] specification with the following vowel:

- (3) a. *kərê* → [kʊrê] ‘man’  
 b. *kərù* → [kʊrù] ‘hyena’  
 c. *gərè* → [gʊrè] ‘voice’

No other vowel quality is found in this environment, suggesting that it is non-contrastive.

The question is: is [ə] (or its various surface allophones) in these words the realization of a schwa vowel phoneme, restricted to appearing only in these initial half syllables, or is it epenthetic or excrescent, there to break up an otherwise complex onset?

While it almost certainly has its origins in a full vowel that underwent a kind of iambic reduction, I argue that synchronically it is best treated as epenthetic. Evidence for this position is not abundant, but the following facts are suggestive. First, Seenku tolerates onset clusters in which the second consonant is a liquid, and in these environments, the schwa is optional. For example:

- (4) a. [bəlě] ~ [blě] ‘big’  
 b. [fəlélé] ~ [flélé] ‘what’  
 c. [sərà] ~ [srà] ‘chief’

One could argue that it is only in the position before liquids that an underlying schwa could be deleted, similar to the syncope of high vowels in languages like Bambara (see e.g. Green 2010), but it seems more likely to me that Seenku only employs this non-contrastive vowel when it is required for phonotactic reasons. Note, however, that velar-liquid clusters are not attested; a short high round vowel is always realized between the two consonants.

Second, in the balafon surrogate language (§22.2.1), the schwa is not treated as an independent vowel. Sesquisyllabic words are treated the same as long vowels, receiving a rapid grace note strike on the xylophone before the strike corresponding to the main vowel. I take this to be evidence that schwa does not have the same level of phonological representation as other vowels, suggesting that they are epenthetic rather than underlying. However, one could also posit a difference between phonologically full and reduced vowels that is represented on the balafon in this way.

Finally, in discussing orthographic possibilities, consultants had no qualms about writing sesquisyllabic words without a schwa or similar vowel, i.e. writing words like ‘dance’ as <smâ>. When some consultants write in Seenku, they likewise write words with initial clusters, but these spellings vary. Since the language does not have a written tradition, native speaker intuitions about orthography should be treated with caution, as they may have influences from French, Jula, or other lan-

guages in which the person may be literate, but they still offer a glimpse into their metalinguistic knowledge.

In sum, there is no uncontroversial evidence pointing to the phonemic status of schwa, but what evidence exists suggests that it is not underlying. In the transcription system used in this grammar, however, I will typically write sesquisyllabic words with a schwa, which better represents their surface pronunciation, though if C2 is a liquid and the word typically begins with a cluster, I will write it that way (i.e. *blǎ* ‘fall’ rather than *bəlǎ*).

### 3.1.4 Minimal pairs

The following subsections will run through each of the vowel phonemes, discussing allophones and providing minimal and near minimal pairs with similar phonemes. So as not to duplicate efforts, minimal pairs contrasting short and long vowels will be provided beginning in §3.1.4.8; minimal pairs contrasting nasality will be given beginning in §3.1.4.15. Diphthongal contrasts (both between diphthongs and between monophthongs and diphthongs) will be given beginning in §3.1.4.23.

#### 3.1.4.1 /i/

The vowel /i/ is a high front unrounded vowel with just a single allophone [i]. As will be discussed in §3.5.1.1, it has a tendency to palatalize and/or spirantize the preceding consonant. The following minimal pairs show that /i/ contrasts in height with /e/ and /ε/ and in backness with /u/:

(5) *Minimal pairs for /i/ vs...*

/e/	<i>jən</i>	‘front’	<i>ji</i>	‘grindstone’
/ε/	<i>kɛ</i>	‘moon’	<i>ci</i>	‘house’
/u/	<i>bũ</i>	‘sand’	<i>bi</i>	‘goats’

#### 3.1.4.2 /e/

The vowel /e/ is a front mid unrounded [+ATR] vowel. It is the rarest vowel in Seenku, more commonly found in the diphthong /ie(e)/ than as a monophthongal vowel quality. It shows no allophonic variation. The vowel /e/ contrasts with /i/ in height, with /ε/ in [ATR], and with /o/ in backness:

(6) *Minimal pairs for /e/ vs...*

/i/	<i>ji</i>	‘grindstone’	<i>jən</i>	‘front’
/ε/	<i>tɛ</i>	‘who’	<i>tɛ</i>	(genitive particle)
/o/	<i>jøn</i>	‘slave’	<i>jən</i>	‘front’

**3.1.4.3 /ɛ/**

The vowel /ɛ/ is a front mid unrounded [-ATR] vowel. In contrast to its [+ATR] correspondent, it is one of the most common vowels in Seenku, found in many of the function words as well as core vocabulary. Unlike the previous two vowels, the vowel /ɛ/ has two allophones: an elsewhere case [ɛ] and a centralized allophone [ɜ], found primarily after alveolar affricates. For example, the indefinite quantifier /tsɛ̃/ is most commonly pronounced [tsɜ̃]. Unlike the central [ə] in sesquisyllabic words, this allophone [ɜ] is more tense, with an audibly retracted tongue root quality to it. See §3.5.5 for further discussion. /ɛ/ contrasts with /i/ and /a/ in height, with /e/ in [ATR], and with /ɔ/ in backness:

(7) *Minimal pairs for /ɛ/ vs...*

/i/	cî	'house'	kê	'moon'
/a/	kâ	'griot'	kê	'moon'
/e/	tě	(genitive)	tě	'who'
/ɔ/	f̃	'grow'	fě	'blow'

**3.1.4.4 /a/**

The vowel /a/ is a low central unrounded vowel in Seenku. Its pronunciation is consistent, with just the single allophone [a]. It contrasts with /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ in height and backness.

(8) *Minimal pairs for /a/ vs....*

/ɛ/	kê	'moon'	kâ	'griot'
/ɔ/	s̃	'arrive'	sâ	'cry'

**3.1.4.5 /ɔ/**

The vowel /ɔ/ is a back mid rounded [-ATR] vowel. It has just the single allophone [ɔ]. The following minimal pairs show that /ɔ/ contrasts with /ɔ/ and /a/ in height, with /o/ in [ATR], and with /ɛ/ in backness:

(9) *Minimal pairs for /ɔ/ vs....*

/ɔ/	k̃	'rock hyrax'	à k̃	'his bone'
/a/	sâ	'cry'	s̃	'arrive'
/o/	s̃n	'fun'	s̃n	'sky'
/ɛ/	fě	'blow'	f̃	'grow'

**3.1.4.6 /o/**

Like the [+ATR] vowel /e/, the vowel /o/ is not frequent in Seenku. It is a mid back rounded [+ATR] vowel that shows no allophony, being consistently pronounced as [o]. It contrasts with /u/ in height, with /ɔ/ in [ATR], and with /e/ in backness:

(10) *Minimal pairs for /o/ vs....*

/u/	tsù	'straw'	tòn	'pond'
/ɔ/	són	'sky'	són	'fun'
/e/	jèn	'front'	jòn	'slave'

**3.1.4.7 /u/**

The vowel /u/ is a high back rounded vowel. Between a palatal onset and the high front vowel /i/ in diphthongs, it surfaces variably as the allophone [y], as in *núú* [n<sup>y</sup>í] 'honey'. It contrasts with /o/ and /ɔ/ in height and with /i/ in backness, and with /ʊ/ in [ATR]:

(11) *Minimal pairs for /u/ vs....*

/o/	tòn	'pond'	tsù	'straw'
/ɔ/	lǝ	'here'	lǝ	'courtyard'
/i/	bí	'goats'	bǝ	'sand'
/ʊ/	jù	'year'	jǝ	'water'

**3.1.4.8 /ii/**

After labiovelars, the long vowel /ii/ is realized with a slight [ə] onglide, [əii]. It is otherwise simply a longer version of /i/. We can contrast the long vowel /ii/ with both short /i/ and with other similar long vowel phonemes, such as /ee/, /εε/, and /uu/:

(12) *Minimal pairs for /ii/ vs....*

/i/	à ní	'his father'	à níi	'his tongue'
/ee/	jèe	'be day'	kpîi	'faint'
/εε/	kpèε	'sew'	kpîi	'faint'
/uu/	núun	'hoarse'	nîi	'pregnancy'

**3.1.4.9 /ee/**

If /e/ is rare, its equivalent long vowel /ee/ is even rarer, attested in only a handful of words. In principle, it contrasts with /e/ in length, with /ii/ in height, with /εε/ in [ATR], and with /oo/ in backness, but minimal pairs are difficult to find. I take these to be accidental gaps, as there is nothing predictable about the distribution of /ee/. Near minimal pairs are listed below:

(13) *Near minimal pairs for /ee/ vs...*

/e/	<i>jábě</i>	'cloth'	<i>cəbèe</i>	'shea nut'
/ii/	<i>kpīi</i>	'faint'	<i>jèe</i>	'be day'
/εε/	<i>mó cěε</i>	'my egg'	<i>cèe</i>	'blacksmith'
/oo/	<i>kôo</i>	'be born'	<i>jèe</i>	'be day'

**3.1.4.10 /εε/**

The long vowel /εε/ is quite common. Unlike /ε/, which has a centralized allophone, /εε/ is consistently pronounced as a front vowel; however, the environment for centralization (after alveolar affricates) is unattested for the long vowel, so it is not clear whether this process would also affect them. For more on phonotactics and combinatorial statistics, see §3.3.3. The following minimal pairs illustrate the contrast in length with /ε/, in height with /ii/ and /aa/, in [ATR] with /ee/, and in backness with /ɔɔ/.

(14) *Minimal pairs for /εε/ vs...*

/ε/	<i>ně</i>	'come'	<i>něε</i>	'coil up'
/ii/	<i>kpīi</i>	'faint'	<i>kpěε</i>	'sew'
/aa/	<i>káa</i>	'chase'	<i>kěε</i>	'break'
/ee/	<i>cəbèe</i>	'shea'	<i>běε</i>	'pig'
/ɔɔ/	<i>dɔɔ</i>	'snatch'	<i>děε</i>	'accustom'

**3.1.4.11 /aa/**

The long vowel /aa/ has just a single allophone, [aa]. It contrasts with /a/ in length and with /εε/ and /ɔɔ/ in height.

(15) *Minimal pairs for /aa/ vs...*

/a/	<i>kâ</i>	'griot'	<i>kâa</i>	'fight'
/εε/	<i>kěε</i>	'break'	<i>kâa</i>	'chase'
/ɔɔ/	<i>bɔɔ</i>	'age'	<i>bâa</i>	'wear out'

**3.1.4.12 /ɔɔ/**

Like /aa/, the long vowel /ɔɔ/ shows no allophonic variation. It contrasts with /ɔ/ in length, with /aa/ in height, with /oo/ in [ATR], and with /εε/ in backness.

(16) *Minimal pairs for /ɔɔ/ vs...*

/ɔ/	<i>mó kɔ</i>	'my bone'	<i>mó kɔɔ</i>	'my brother'
/aa/	<i>bâa</i>	'wear out'	<i>bɔɔ</i>	'age'
/oo/	<i>sóo</i>	'gather'	<i>sɔɔ</i>	'sell'
/εε/	<i>děε</i>	'accustom'	<i>dɔɔ</i>	'snatch'

**3.1.4.13 /oo/**

The vowel /oo/ is considerably more common than its front equivalent /ee/. It contrasts with /o/ in length, with /uu/ in height, with /ɔɔ/ in [ATR], and with /ee/ in backness. However, the minimal pair with /uu/ is not a perfect illustration, as the two words differ in category (adverb vs. verb). See §3.1.4.14 below for a discussion of /uu/.

(17) *Minimal pairs for /oo/ vs...*

/o/	à tò	'his testicle'	à tòo	'his ear'
/uu/	súu	'directly'	sóo	'gather'
/ɔɔ/	kɔɔ	'walk'	kôo	'be born'
/ee/	jèe	'be day'	kôo	'be born'

**3.1.4.14 /uu/**

There is nothing to indicate that long /uu/ should not be phonemic, given the consistent length distinctions for other vowels, yet examples of long /uu/ in core vocabulary (nouns and verbs) are lacking. The closest example is *núun* 'hoarse', a participial modifier. All other examples of /uu/ are found in either ideophones or ideophonic quantifiers, like *kəruú* 'all', already unusual in its tone pattern (two distinct H tones in a row, with plural *kəruú*). It is unclear whether it is simply a rare vowel phoneme, yet to be gathered into the lexicon, or whether it is a gap in the core phoneme inventory. Given the lack of core vocabulary with /uu/, I will not provide the full set of minimal pairs. A near minimal pair for length, however, can be found with *kəru* 'thorn' vs. *kəruú* 'all'.

**3.1.4.15 /i/**

We now turn to the nasal vowels and their contrasts with oral vowels. The short high front vowel /i/ contrasts with its oral equivalent /i/ in nasality, with /ɛ/ in height, and with /ɥ/ in backness.

(18) *Minimal pairs for /i/ vs...*

/i/	bí	'goats'	bí	'horns'
/ɛ/	fɛ́	'yet'	fí	'two'
/ɥ/	fəɥí	'bean'	fəɥí	'broom'

**3.1.4.16 /ɛ/**

The vowel /ɛ/ displays the same pattern of centralization as its oral equivalent, yielding two allophones: [ɜ] after alveolar affricates and [ɛ] elsewhere. Given the limited environment for [ɜ], it is not surprising that it is only attested in one word in most people's speech: [tsɜ́] 'how'. In the speech of some people, there is variation between palatal stops and alveolar affricates, thus other examples are attested, such [à tsɜ́]

'his foot', but most people would pronounce this as [à cɛ̃], with a palatal stop and the allophone [ɛ̃]. For discussion of the palatal/alveolar affricate variation, see §3.5.1.3.

The phoneme /ɛ̃/ contrasts with /ɛ/ in nasality, with /ĩ/ and /ã/ in height, and with /ɔ̃/ in backness.

(19) *Minimal pairs for /ɛ̃/ vs...*

/ɛ̃/	təgɛ̃	'chickens'	təgɛ̃	'cheeks'
/ĩ/	fɪ̃	'two'	fɛ̃	'yet'
/ã/	bɑ̃	'table'	kpɛ̃	'hunt'
/ɔ̃/	à kɔ̃n	'his head'	à cɛ̃	'his foot'

**3.1.4.17 /ã/**

The low nasal vowel /ã/ contrasts with /a/ in nasality, and with /ɛ̃/ and /ɔ̃/ in height.

(20) *Minimal pairs for /ã/ vs...*

/ã/	dán	'lie'	dán	'hump (back)'
/ɛ̃/	kpɛ̃	'hunt'	bɑ̃	'table'
/ɔ̃/	tsɔ̃	'be submerged'	sɑ̃	'buy'

**3.1.4.18 /ɔ̃/**

The vowel /ɔ̃/ contrasts with /ɔ/ in nasality, with /ũ/ and /ã/ in height, and with /ɛ̃/ in backness.

(21) *Minimal pairs for /ɔ̃/ vs...*

/ɔ̃/	jɔ̃	'brew beer'	jɔ̃	'grill'
/ũ/	à tsɔ̃	'his skin'	à tsɔ̃	'his pity'
/ã/	sɑ̃	'buy'	tsɔ̃	'be submerged'
/ɛ̃/	à cɛ̃	'his foot'	à kɔ̃n	'his head'

**3.1.4.19 /ũ/**

The high back nasal vowel /ũ/ contrasts with /u/ in nasality, with /ɔ̃/ in height, and with /ĩ/ in backness.

(22) *Minimal pairs for /ũ/ vs...*

/ũ/	jù	'year'	jù	'hill'
/ɔ̃/	à tsɔ̃	'his pity'	à tsɔ̃	'his skin'
/ĩ/	fərù	'beans'	fərù	'broom'

**3.1.4.20 /iᶨ/**

The long high front nasal vowel /iᶨ/ contrasts with /ii/ in nasality, with /i/ in length, and with /εᶨ/ in height.

(23) *Minimal pairs for /iᶨ/ vs...*

/ii/	kp̃i	'faint'	kp̃iᶨ	'spark'
/i/	bᶦ	'horns'	kp̃iᶨ	'spark'
/εᶨ/	səgᶨᶨ	'grave'	səgᶨiᶨ	'market'

**3.1.4.21 /εᶨ/**

The long mid front nasal vowel /εᶨ/ contrasts with /εε/ in nasality, with /ε/ in length, and with /iᶨ/ and /aᶨ/ in height.

(24) *Minimal pairs for /εᶨ/ vs...*

/εε/	kᶨᶨ	'totem'	kᶨᶨᶨ	'tomorrow'
/ε/	kpᶨ	'hunt'	kᶨᶨᶨ	'tomorrow'
/ii/	səgᶨᶨ	'grave'	səgᶨiᶨ	'market'
/aᶨ/	bᶨᶨ	'balafon'	pᶨᶨᶨ	'donkeys'

**3.1.4.22 /aᶨ/**

The long low nasal vowel /aᶨ/ is very rare. Phonemically, it appears only in the noun *bᶨᶨ* 'balafon', though it is also found on rising tones, where length contrasts are neutralized, such as *kᶨᶨ*. With just this one word, I will not present minimal pairs.

**3.1.4.23 /ui/**

We now turn to diphthongal contrasts. Diphthongs will be contrasted both with their monophthongal elements and with similar diphthongs. Where possible, I will provide minimal pairs using non-derived diphthongs, that is, diphthongs found in uninflected lexical items rather than those derived from plural formation or other morphological processes. Finally, to conserve space, I will not treat short and long diphthongs separately, but instead focus on the vocalic qualities. However, if giving an example with a long diphthong, it will be provided in a minimal pair with matching length.

First, the diphthong /ui/ is relatively rare in uninflected lexical items, but it can be found. It contrasts with both /u/ and /i/, and their long counterparts; it is also distinct from similar diphthongs /ue/ and /oe/.

(25) *Minimal pairs for /ui/ vs...*

/u/	<i>bũ</i>	'sand'	<i>bũi</i>	'deaf-mute'
/i/	<i>jəgĩ</i>	'crush'	<i>jəgũi</i>	'urinate'
/ue/	<i>mó cũen</i>	'my elbow'	<i>cũi</i>	'turtle'
/oe/	<i>ĩ bõe</i>	'their backs'	<i>bũi</i>	'deaf-mutes'

**3.1.4.24 /ie/**

The diphthong /ie/ is attested both lexically and derivationally, though it is far more common in the latter condition through realis formation or irregular derivation (e.g. the locative *cĩe* 'in the house' vs. *cĩ* 'house', or *tsĩen* 'pestle', likely from *tsĩ-dẽn* 'mortar child'). It contrasts with both /i/ and /e/, and with the diphthongs /ie/, /io/ and /ue/.

(26) *Minimal pairs for /ie/ vs...*

/i/	<i>tsĩ</i>	'mortar'	<i>tsĩen</i>	'pestle'
/e/	<i>tế</i>	(genitive)	<i>tsĩe</i>	'black'
/ie/	<i>fĩe</i>	'blow (realis)'	<i>fĩe</i>	'throw (realis)'
/ue/	<i>à cũen</i>	'his elbow'	<i>cĩe</i>	'in the house'

**3.1.4.25 /ue/**

The diphthong /ue/ often co-occurs with a coda nasal. It is mainly a lexical rather than derived diphthong. It contrasts with the monophthongs /u/ and /e/, and with the diphthongs /ie/, /ue/, /ui/, and /uo/.

(27) *Minimal pairs for /ue/ vs...*

/u/	<i>sũ</i>	'antelope'	<i>sũen</i>	'trunkfish'
/e/	<i>dəgẽn</i>	'remainder'	<i>dəgũen</i>	'small tree ( <i>Maranthes polyandra</i> )'
/ie/	<i>tsĩen</i>	'pestle'	<i>cũen</i>	'tilapia'
/ui/	<i>cũi</i>	'turtle'	<i>cũen</i>	'tilapia'
/ue/	<i>cũe</i>	'vomit'	<i>à cũen</i>	'his elbow'
/uo/	<i>sũo</i>	'picked up'	<i>sũen</i>	'trunkfish'

**3.1.4.26 /oe/**

The diphthong /oe/ is rare lexically. It is most commonly attested in alternations between singular /o/ and plural /oe/. As such, it contrasts with /o/ (where [oe] marks the plural), and also with /e/, /ɔe/, and /ue/. Even though the diphthong-initial round vowel is non-moraic and is pronounced as a glide, /ue/ and /oe/ remain distinct in that /ue/ triggers palatalization from the high vowel while /oe/ does not. Thus, the last minimal pair in the following table would be pronounced [fũeŋ] vs. [søeŋ].

(28) *Minimal pairs for /oe/ vs...*

/o/	kò	'rock hyrax'	kòe	'rock hyraxes'
/e/	jèn	'front'	jòe	'slaves'
/ɔɛ/	à kòɛ	'his bones'	kòe	'rock hyraxes'
/ue/	súen	'trunkfish'	sòe	'horses'

## 3.1.4.27 /iɛ/

This diphthong /iɛ/ is similar to its [+ATR] counterpart in terms of frequency and distribution; it is found in a handful of lexical items and is otherwise created through diphthongization processes like realis formation (§13.1). It contrasts with its component monophthongs /i/ and /ɛ/, and with the diphthongs /ie/, /iɔ/ and /uɛ/.

(29) *Minimal pairs for /iɛ/ vs...*

/i/	bí	'goats'	bíɛ	'grasshopper'
/ɛ/	fɛ́	'blow (irrealis)'	fíɛ	'blow (realis)'
/ie/	fíe	'throw (realis)'	fíɛ	'blow (realis)'
/iɔ/	sɔ́	'feces'	síɛ	'mean'
/uɛ/	fúɛ	'twenty'	fíɛ	'baobab'

## 3.1.4.28 /uɛ/

The diphthong /uɛ/ is mainly a lexical diphthong—it is not derived by realis formation, since typically the front vowel /i/ would be inserted before /ɛ/, though it is occasionally created in plural formation with singular /uɔ/ (see the fifth minimal pair below). It contrasts with its component monophthongs /u/ and /ɛ/ as well as with the diphthongs /ie/, /ɔɛ/, /uɔ/, and /ue/.

(30) *Minimal pairs for /uɛ/ vs...*

/u/	kû	'thing'	kûɛ	'calabash'
/ɛ/	kê	'moon'	kûɛ	'calabash'
/ie/	fíe	'baobabs'	fúɛ	'twenty'
/ɔɛ/	à kòɛ	'his bones'	kûɛ	'calabash'
/uɔ/	gùɔ	'country'	gûɛ	'countries'
/ue/	à cuè	'his elbows'	cûɛ	'vomit'

## 3.1.4.29 /ɔɛ/

There are no instances of lexical /ɔɛ/. It is only created via plural formation, due to fronting of /ɔ/. It contrasts with /ɔ/, as well as with /ɛ/, /uɛ/, and /oe/.

(31) *Minimal pairs for /ɔɛ/ vs....*

/ɔ/	à kɔ̃	'his bone'	à kɔ̃ɛ	'his bones'
/ɛ/	kɛ́	'yams'	kɔ́ɛ	'buttons'
/uɛ/	kúɛ	'calabashes'	kɔ́ɛ	'buttons'
/oe/	kòe	'rock hyraxes'	à kɔ̃ɛ	'his bones'

**3.1.4.30 /io/**

The diphthong /io/ is rare, but there are both lexical and derived cases, with the latter the result of realis formation. It is found after coronals (which palatalize) and in one instance after /p/ (in the ideophone *pí'o* '(not) at all'). Since these are environments where /uo/ is rare, it is difficult to find minimal pairs for these two diphthongs. It contrasts with /i/ and /o/, and with /uo/, /iɔ/, and /ie/.

(32) *Minimal pairs for /io/ vs...*

/i/	tsí	'mortar'	tsí'o	'bat'
/o/	tòn	'pond'	tsí'o	'poke (realis)'
/uo/	sú'o	'picked up'	tí'sí'o	'sneeze'
/iɔ/	tsíɔ	'fart'	tsí'o	'bat'
/ie/	tsíe	'black'	tsí'o	'bat'

**3.1.4.31 /uo/**

The diphthong /uo/ is very rare. It is unattested lexically, raising the possibility that the vowel quality /u/ may have arisen diachronically from /uo/. However, synchronically, this analysis cannot be defended, as [uo] is derived from realis formation and is pronounced distinctly (as a diphthong) in forms such as *bú'o* 'killed (realis)'. It contrasts with the monophthongs /u/ and /o/, as well as with the diphthong /uɔ/.

(33) *Minimal pairs for /uo/ vs...*

/u/	sú	'pick up'	sú'o	'picked up'
/o/	bó	'kill'	bú'o	'killed'
/uɔ/	búɔ	'take out (realis)'	bú'o	'kill (realis)'

**3.1.4.32 /iɔ/**

The diphthong /iɔ/ is found both phonemically and also derived through realis formation. Like other [i]-initial diphthongs, it triggers palatalization and spirantization of preceding consonants (see §3.5.1.1 and §3.5.1.2, respectively). It contrasts with its component monophthongs, /i/ and /ɔ/, and with similar diphthongs /io/, /ie/, and /ia/. It is difficult to find minimal pairs for /iɔ/ and /uɔ/, since the latter never occurs with

coronal consonants (the primary environment for /iɔ/, though it is also attested after bilabials in words like *pɔ̀n* ‘flute’).

(34) *Minimal pairs for /iɔ/ vs...*

/i/	sɔ̀	‘excrement’	sɔ̀	‘water jar’
/ɔ/	tsɔ̀	‘bow (archery)’	tsɔ̀	‘fart’
/io/	tsɔ̀	‘bat (animal)’	tsɔ̀	‘fart’
/iɛ/	ɲiɛ	‘insult (realis)’	ɲɔ̀	‘eat (realis)’
/ia/	ɲià	‘finish (realis)’	ɲɔ̀	‘eat (realis)’

Note that some speakers do not palatalize the /n/ in the realis of ‘eat’ (cf. irrealis *nɔ̀*), pronouncing the form instead as *nɔ̀*.

**3.1.4.33 /uɔ/**

As stated in the last subsection, /uɔ/ appears primarily after non-coronal consonants. It is both a lexical diphthong and one derived through realis formation. It contrasts with both /u/ and /ɔ/, and with the diphthongs /uo/ and /uɛ/; due to distributional restrictions, no minimal pairs could be found with /iɔ/.

(35) *Minimal pairs for /uɔ/ vs...*

/u/	à gù	‘his neck’	gùɔ̀	‘country’
/ɔ/	à kɔ̀	‘his bone’	kùɔ̀	‘grass’
/uo/	bùo	‘kill (realis)’	bùɔ̀	‘take out (realis)’
/uɛ/	kùɛ	‘calabash’	kùɔ̀	‘doum palm’

**3.1.4.34 /ia/**

The diphthong /ia/ is mainly a lexical diphthong, but it is sometimes created through realis formation as well. It is considerably rarer than high-mid diphthongs. It contrasts with /i/ and /a/, and with the monophthongs /iɛ/, /iɔ/, and /ua/.

(36) *Minimal pairs for /ia/ vs...*

/i/	sí	‘tree sp. ( <i>Terminalia</i> sp.)’	sía	‘Bobo-Dioulasso’
/a/	fâ	‘flour’	à fîa	‘his lung’
/iɛ/	fîɛ	‘fourth son (birth order name)’	à fîa	‘his lung’
/iɔ/	ɲiɔ̀	‘eat (realis)’	ɲià	‘finish (realis)’
/ua/	kùà	‘other’	kpərù-kì-kîa	‘snail’

**3.1.4.35 /ua/**

The diphthong /ua/ is only a lexical diphthong; that is, it is never derived through morphological processes like plural or realis formation. It contrasts with its component monophthongs /u/ and /a/, and with the diphthongs /uε/, /uɔ/, and /ia/.

(37) *Minimal pairs for /ua/ vs...*

/u/	tərú	'gather up'	tərúa	'curve, zigzag'
/a/	kùaa	'farm'	káa	'chase'
/uε/	kûε	'calabash'	kùa	'other'
/uɔ/	kùɔ	'grass'	kùa	'other'
/ia/	kpərù-kì-kíā	'snail'	kùa	'other'

**3.1.4.36 /ua/**

Since the diphthong /ua/ is only attested in one morpheme /súaa/ 'path, way', I will treat it as a marginal contrast and not provide minimal pairs here.

**3.1.4.37 /uj/**

The nasal diphthong /uj/ is a lexical diphthong, but can also be created in plural formation by fronting an underlying /u/. It contrasts with /u/ and /i/, with /ui/ in nasality, and with the similar nasal diphthong /uε/.

(38) *Minimal pairs for /uj/ vs...*

/u/	kú	'catch'	kúj	'deny'
/i/	fí	'two'	fíj	'bull'
/ui/	fúi	'nothing'	fúi	'bull'
/uε/	ɛ́ɛ fúε	'his wife'	fúj	'bull'

**3.1.4.38 /iε/**

The diphthong /iε/ is both lexical and derived in realis formation. With its initial /i/, it triggers palatalization and spirantization of preceding velar, alveolar, and palatal stops and fricatives. It contrasts with non-nasal /ie/, its component vowels /i/ and /ε/, as well as with nasal diphthongs /iɔ/, /iə/ and /uε/.

(39) *Minimal pairs for /iε/ vs...*

/ie/	cíε	'baskets'	mó cíε	'my feet'
/i/	mí	'drink (realis)'	míε	'understand (realis)'
/ε/	sɛ́	'dig (irrealis)'	síε	'dig (realis)'
/iɔ/	síɔ	'introduce (realis)'	síε	'dig (realis)'
/iə/	tsíə	'lean'	síε	'dig (realis)'
/uε/	âa fúε	'your wife'	tâ-fíε	'hot'

**3.1.4.39 /uɛ/**

The diphthong /uɛ/ is fairly rare in Seenku; where it is attested, it is lexical rather than derived. It contrasts with /uɛ/ in nasality, with component vowels /u/ and /ɛ/, and with similar diphthongs /iɛ/, /ɔɛ/, and /uɔ/.

(40) *Minimal pairs for /uɛ/ vs...*

/uɛ/	fúɛ	‘twenty’	âa fùɛ	‘your wife’
/u/	fù	‘wild grape’	âa fùɛ	‘your wife’
/ɛ/	à dzɛ̃	‘his tooth’	dzùɛ	‘scold’
/iɛ/	tâ-fjɛ	‘warm’	âa fùɛ	‘your wife’
/ɔɛ/	bɔɛ	‘stone throwing game’	bùɛ	‘djinn’
/uɔ/	kùɔ	‘bite (realis)’	kùɛ	‘corner’ (French loan > <i>coin</i> )

**3.1.4.40 /ɔɛ/**

The diphthong /ɔɛ/ is almost always derived in Seenku, most commonly in plural formation with common roots such as mɔ̃ ‘person’ with plural mɔ̃ɛ ‘people’. However, a small number of roots with underlying /ɔɛ/ can also be found. It contrasts with /ɔɛ/ in nasality, with /ɔ/ and /ɛ/, and with diphthongs /uɛ/ and /iɛ/.

(41) *Minimal pairs for /ɔɛ/ vs...*

/ɔɛ/	à kɔ̃ɛ	‘his bones’	mí kɔ̃ɛ	‘our heads’
/ɔ/	mɔ̃	‘person’	mɔ̃ɛɛ	‘sorghum’
/ɛ/	dɛ̃	‘walls’	mó dɔ̃ɛ	‘my shoulders’
/uɛ/	bùɛ	‘djinn’	bɔ̃ɛ	‘stone throwing game’
/iɛ/	míɛ	‘snake’	mɔ̃ɛɛ	‘sorghum’

**3.1.4.41 /iɔ/**

The diphthong /iɔ/ is most commonly derived through realis formation, but can occasionally be found underlyingly in a root as well. It contrasts with /iɔ/ in nasality, with its components /i/ and /ɔ/, and with the other nasal diphthongs /iɛ/ and /iã/. Like their non-nasal counterparts, /iɔ/ and /uɔ/ are in complementary distribution.

(42) *Minimal pairs for /iɔ/ vs...*

/iɔ/	tsɔ̃	‘fart’	tsɔ̃	‘caterpillar’
/i/	sɪ	‘be’	sɔ̃	‘introduce (realis)’
/ɔ/	à tsɔ̃	‘pity for him’	à tsɔ̃	‘its stem’
/iɛ/	sɪɛ̃	‘dig (realis)’	sɔ̃	‘introduce (realis)’
/iã/	tsɔ̃ã	‘lean’	tsɔ̃	‘caterpillar’

### 3.1.4.42 /ɥɔ̃/

The nasal diphthong /ɥɔ̃/ is found both lexically and derived from realis formation. It is in complementary distribution with /iɔ̃/, found only after non-coronal consonants. It contrasts with its oral equivalent /uɔ̃/, the monophthongs /ɥ/ and /ɔ̃/, and the similar diphthong /ɥɛ̃/.

(43) *Minimal pairs for /ɥɔ̃/ vs...*

/uɔ̃/	kúɔ̃	‘make apologize (realis)’	kúɔ̃	‘bite (realis)’
/ɥ/	kúɥ	‘catch (realis)’	kúɔ̃	‘bite (realis)’
/ɔ̃/	mɔ̃	‘person’	múɔ̃	‘millet’
/ɥɛ̃/	kúɥɛ̃	‘corner’ (French loan > coin)	kúɔ̃	‘bite (realis)’

### 3.1.4.43 /iɔ̃/

The nasal diphthong /iɔ̃/ is only attested in one root: tsìɔ̃ ‘lean’. I suspect that other forms may be possible, but they are unattested in the current data set. Given its marginal nature, I will not provide minimal pairs here.

## 3.2 Consonants

### 3.2.1 Consonant inventory

Seenku has a rich consonant inventory, with five places of articulation, including labiovelars. Stops, oral and nasal, are contrastive at each place of articulation. In addition, Seenku displays phonemic alveolar affricates /ts, dz/, which are rare in Mande but for which the voiced counterpart is attested in related Dzùùngoo (Solomiac 2014). The consonant inventory is shown in Table 3.6. For clarity in the table, phonemes are given in IPA, but where the orthographic convention used in this grammar differs from standard IPA, the grapheme is given in angled brackets after the IPA symbol:

Tab. 3.6: Seenku consonant inventory

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labiovelar
Plosive	(p) b	t d	c ʃ <j>	k g	kp gb
Nasal	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	ɲm
Affricate		ts dz			
Fricative	f	s			
Approximant		l	(j <y>)		w

Two phonemes, bilabial plosive /p/ and palatal glide /j/, are in parentheses; these are marginal phonemes in Seenku, attested in a small number of lexical items. Some