

Representing Complex Oral–Nasal Segments  
in the Kualan Language of Borneo  
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Kualan is a language spoken, with much dialectal variation, along the Kualan River in southwestern Borneo. It is closely related to the Samandang and Simpang languages spoken in adjacent areas. These languages belong to the Land Dayak group of languages, which are spoken over a large stretch of land in the interior of western Borneo, reaching Sarawak in the north. Land Dayak languages belong to the Western Malayo–Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family, but their exact subgrouping within this branch has yet to be determined.

Apparently no previous attempts have been made to write the Kualan language. However, there have been some limited efforts to write Samandang and Simpang. Since the 1980s, some religious texts in Samandang have been produced by foreign missionaries with the help of native speakers. In the 1990s, a few booklets of folk stories in Simpang were published under the sponsorship of the Ford Foundation.

A particular challenge in devising writing systems for southern Land Dayak languages is the representation of complex oral–nasal segments. Kualan, Samandang, and Simpang all have complete series of post–occluded nasals, preoccluded nasals, and prenasalized (oral) stops. Of these, only post–occluded nasals are distinctive; preoccluded nasals and prenasalized stops are allophones of plain nasals and plain stops respectively, and occur in predictable environments. In the writing systems devised for Samandang and Simpang, different strategies were used in representing these complex segments. The Samandang writing system distinguishes plain and post–occluded nasals by marking nasalization of vowels which follow plain nasals with an accent mark, even though speakers are not conscious of this automatic nasalization. The Simpang writing system only distinguishes preoccluded nasals allophones from plain nasals, even though they are in complementary distribution, presumably because they constitute the series most perceptible to outsiders. This paper claims that neither of these strategies is adequate, since they do not result in intuitive phonemic writing systems which can be easily learned and used by native speakers. A third strategy is therefore proposed for Kualan, which enables writers to represent all and only the phonemes of their language.