Gbawáa

Hello all! This is my submission for miacomet#5194's 8th Conlang Discord Network speedlang challenge. I'm very happy with what I've come up with based on the restrictions of the challenge. Many thanks are in order for all those on the CDN for helping me out, to u/sjiveru on Reddit for answering my questions on tone, and especially to miacomet (better? Known as u/roipoiboy) for organizing the speedlang challenge.

I've satisfied all of the requirements- there is contrastive vowel length, one phonemic semivowel /j/, a suprasegmental system of nasal harmony, an open pronoun class, insubordination, and negation is asymmetric. It's all great fun, and I hope you'll enjoy reading about it just as much as I enjoyed making it.

As a heads up, the formatting here is not great; you might have to read through blocks of text to catch crucial information, though I've tried to offset this where I can- however, since walls of text are illegal in the state of Oklahoma, it was necessary that I provide a warning- proceed with caution.

With that out of the way, let's get into the conlanging!

1. Phonology

Romanisation is denoted with <angle brackets>. Allophones appear in (curved brackets) and appear next to the phoneme they are allophones of. More information is seen in sections 1.1 and 1.2., which detail much of the allophony present in the language.

1.1 Consonants

Consonants	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Labial-Velar	Velar	Glottal
Nasal	m (w)	n (j) <y>				
Stop	p b	t d		kp gb	k g	(ʔ) <’>
Fricative		s (z)				
Approximant			j <y>			

Here is the consonant inventory of Gbawàa. It is relatively small, with only 14 consonants. There is some allophony, which includes the allophones of the nasals /m n/, which become /w j/ intervocalically. I have chosen not to analyze these as separate phonemes, because they and other allophones are the only phones that appear solely intervocalically. Other sounds that voice intervocalically include /p t k/ > /b d g/, and /s/ > /z/. /b d g j/ are phonemes in their own right, and can appear in all positions in a word. The glottal stop /ʔ/ is elaborated on in Section 1.2, Vowels.

1.2 Vowels

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
High	i i: <ii> ĩ: <in>		u u: <uu> ũ: <un>
Mid	e ie iẽ (uõ) <ien/uon>		o uo
Low		a a: <aa>	

Gbáwaa has an average vowel inventory, complicated by the other sets of vowel features present, length and nasality.

In addition, multiple vowels can appear side by side separated with a glottal stop /ʔ/. Since the appearance of the glottal stop is always predictable, it is non-phonemic. This can occur with all vowels, long, short or nasal, and even the diphthongs /ie uo/. The glottal stop is represented orthographically by an apostrophe <’>.

There exist the five cardinal vowels /a e i o u/. <e o> are close-mid, and <a> is central /ä/. There is also vowel length, and the two diphthongs /ie uo/, which pattern as long vowels. Long vowels are always tonal, but there do exist short tonal vowels (albeit from predictable phonological

processes, in this case tone spreading) so I will analyze them as phonemic. More information about.tone and long vowels is available in section 1.3., Prosody.

Finally, there are nasal vowels, of which there are three, /ĩ ũ iẽ/, and a third allophone of iẽ, uõ, which appears before a coarticulated labial-velar, i.e /kp gb/. All nasal vowels are romanized with a <Vn>, where V is the vowel. All true nasal vowels are long vowels, or in the case of /iẽ~uõ/, diphthongs, though through nasal harmony nasality can be spread to short vowels. For more on that, again see Section 1.3, Prosody.

1.3 Prosody

Prosody in Gbawáa is quite complex, with systems of tone and nasal harmony. The tone system causes many instances of upstep and downstep triggered by grammatical processes.

Nasal harmony is the simplest to explain. It begins with one of the four nasal vowel phones, /iẽ uõ ũː ĩː/ appearing in a word. The nasal harmony will spread rightwards until blocked by an obstruent /p t k s/. The glottal stop /ʔ/, despite being an obstruent, does not block nasal spreading. The nasality is spread to following vowels with no change to their quality or length, so the word *pien'a, woman,* is pronounced /piẽːˑʔã/ with a short /a/, not /piẽːˑʔãː/.

Next, there's tone, which is much more complicated. Gbawáa does not allow two vowels of the same tone to appear in consecutive syllables, so a word like *díiwáa* is disallowed. The first tonal vowel to appear in a given word is always a long vowel or diphthong and is never nasal, as in words like Gbawáa, where *wáa* is the first tonal syllable. Tonal long vowels will always spread an opposite tone onto the following syllable, whether its vowel is short or long, e.g. *mìidán, pear,* where *mìi* spreads an opposite tone to the following syllable *dan*, making it into *dán*. This also happens to preexisting tones in compounds, for example samàa + kùodú would yield *samàagúodù,* with the new high tone on *gúo* spreading *its* opposite tone to the following syllable. In fact, when two of the same tone follow each other as a result of a compound or affix, the result is always changed, e.g. *sàawú + níi > sàawúyìi*, even though the vowel on *wu* is not a long vowel.

Things change when suffixes are added, however. If a similar tone mismatch happens when a suffix, e.g. *-dùu* in a construction like *sáawò + -dùu,* it will yield *sáawòdúu*, as expected. However, because the mismatch took place from a word-final affix, the original low tone will surface as a downstep on the first syllable of the following word. This kind of process only works with affixes, so in our previous example of *samàagúodù,* the lost high tone on *dù* will not surface as an upstep. Additionally this only works across word boundaries, so if another affix is added to *sáawòdúu*, e.g. sáawòdúuwè, there won't be any upstep on *-wè,* because it's within a word boundary rather than across one.

1.4 Syllable Structure

Gbawáa has a relatively simple syllable structure. The syllable structure is (C)V, with consonants optional at the beginning of words. A non-nasal long vowel never appears before underlying nasals.

2. Word Order

Gbawáa is a mostly head-final language- the order of Subject, Object and Verb is SOV or Subject-Object-Verb. There is no other role marking so the word order is very strict, and no other primary word orders are allowed. There is also another main component of the sentence, the focus particle that appears at the beginning of every sentence.
Other word classes have different patterns but are generally head-final. Adjectives and postpositions aren't really a thing in Gbawáa, but the generic locative (the only true postposition) is a postposition and thus follows head-final ordering. The remaining postpositions and adjectives follow the words they modify (with adjectives marking an exception to head-finality) because they exist as classes of verbs, and a verb is usually the final word in the sentence. The word order for all of these is strict as well. Possessors precede their nouns, albeit within the framework of the possessive construction (see Section 2.4, Noun Possession for more info.) Relative clauses precede the nouns they modify.

3. Nouns and Focus Marking

Nouns are relatively simple in Gbawáa. There is no inflection on any nouns, but there are multiple particles that follow or precede nouns. This section will also detail the sentence-initial focus particles, numeral classifiers (which may also appear on the indefinite article) and the possessive construction.

2.1 Focus Marking

Let's begin with (in my opinion) one of the most interesting parts of Gbawáa, the focus particles, which appear at the beginning of every sentence.

As an obligatory aside, *focus* here generally means new information being introduced to a conversation, like answers to questions or a person mentioned for the first time in a conversation. However, if there is no focus in a sentence, any non-focus argument of the sentence may be marked with a focus particle. There's also a particle for sentences without any nouns present, like weather verbs (i.e. raining, snowing)- see the examples of different focus particles below. Only nouns can be focused, never verbs.

Here's an example sentence, showing how the focus particles work.-

Súu saya kiwu làagá
HUMAN.FOCUS 1P 2P HIT
"I hit you"

súu here is a focus particle, telling us that a human noun in the sentence is focused. Since both nouns, as pronouns, are (presumably) human, it doesn't tell us anything about which noun is focused, but it does provide a good example of Gbawáa's focus particles, which provide information on the noun class[1] the focused noun in the following sentence is in. There are many different focus particles in Gbawáa, and the different noun classes of focus particles are much

[1] Using noun class here as an imprecise term; there is no actual morphological gender system that exists outside of this system, where a noun's class modifies other words around it.

like those of number classifiers in Mandarin Chinese or Japanese. Here are some examples of different focus particles:

- *báa,* a particle showing that a *round thing* in the sentence is focused.
- *yùu,* a particle showing that a *body part* or *long, thin object* is focused.
- *ka,* a particle showing that a *livestock* or any *horned animal*, or a *vehicle* is focused.
- *kpuò,* a particle showing that a *small animal or rodent* is focused.
- *din,* a particle showing that a *predatory or dangerous animal* is focused.
- *tu,* a particle showing that a *stone, jagged or broken object or broken off piece of an object* is focused.
- *nàa,* a particle showing that a *flat circular thing, month or year, wheel, gear, or machine* (not including vehicles) is focused.
- *súu*, a particle showing that a *human* is focused.
- *go,* a particle for weather verbs where no nouns exist.
- *un,* a particle for plants and other flora (not grass).
- *ye,* a generic particle for a noun not covered by any other particle, like most loanwords.

2.2 The Indefinite Article and Numeral Classifiers

The indefinite article in Gbawáa is *íi,* which marks nouns that the listener is not expected to know- this differs from the focus particles in that focus particles mark nouns new to a conversation, but which may still be known by the listener. It appears following the noun it modifies.

Another important detail of the indefinite article is that it takes *numeral classifiers*, which appear on all numerals/the indefinite article. There are four of them, which appear as suffixes on the numeral or article. Here they are:

- *-sa,* the classifier for inanimates
- *-kíi,* the classifier for animate nouns
- *-mo,* the classifier for long, thin things, e.g. ropes
- *-yien*, the classifier for thin, flat, things, e.g. blankets or sheets of paper.

There is no continuity between the numeral classifiers and the focus markers, so nouns that may use *yúu,* the focus marker for long, thin, objects, may not use *-mo* and vice versa. Many nouns that could be considered long, thin, things do not use *-mo* and instead use the generic inanimate *-kíi.* Same with *-yien*. *-mo* and *-yien* are often used interchangeably with *-kíi* as well, so a noun may take either, or may take one in different context, for example using *-kíi* for fish in the ocean, and *-yien* for fish on a plate.

The distinction between the inanimate *-kíi* and animate *-yien* is not clear, much like the animacy distinctions in many other languages- *many* commonly used nouns/ culturally important nouns take *-sa* instead of *-kíi.* (For example, *mìidán, pear,* takes *-sa*) It is overall very hard to predict a noun's classifier based on the noun itself.

2.3 Noun Possession

Next, there's noun possession, which in my opinion is very fun here. We'll be covering possessive phrases i.e. *Ben's hat*, and the verb *to have* (in the noun section), because it's pretty important for nominal possession.

First of all, nominal possession. Here's an example of a possessive phrase-

da kiza úo mìidán
REL cat COP pear
The cat's pear (lit. that the cat has pear)

The phrase opens with the relative clause marker *da*, which can roughly be translated into English as *that.* Relative clauses precede the nouns they modify in Gbawáa, so the clause here does too. Next comes cat and then *úo, to be / to be at / to have.* The word *úo* means all of these things, coming from an old locative copula that meant *to be at*, that was then co-opted for *to have.* The old copula then fell out of favour and was replaced by the locative copula, so all meaning must be discerned from context. Then comes *pear*, the noun the clause is modifying. This *da … úo* construction is the main possessive construction used in the language. Admittedly, I haven't thought much about relativisation, so if I decide to add more relativizers to the language, they may be used in place of *da*.

2.4 The Locative

There is one locative postposition, *be.* It is used in sentences like *súu saya sienba be káadù, I sit at/near/on the table*. There are other adpositional constructions using converbs, like *I go leaving the house.* Those will be detailed in Section 4.3, Other Adpositional Constructions, once I actually add stuff to it.

2.5 The Vocative

There is also a vocative particle *e* that is place after names or nouns in direct address, which follows the name or noun, for example:

Kpuò panyaye, kizá e!
FOCUS stop-INF. cat VOC
Stop, cat!

The final vowel of the noun in the vocative phrase will take a high tone, as is the case with *kisá*.

4. Verbs

The Gbawáa verb template looks like this (for any finite verb) Verb morphology is overall quite simple.

VERB + IMP. + POLITE + IRREALIS

3.1 Tense and Aspect

Gbawàa has a relatively simple system of tense and aspect. The simplest part is the imperfective suffix *-dúu,* which marks events as processes of multiple events, e.g. *I am in the process of*. It often has a present encoding while the perfective often has a past encoding. Because they are not processes but rather states, statives (like adjectival verbs and *úo*) cannot take aspect marking, and semelfactives (like *to hiccup, to hit*) cannot take aspect marking either; English treats imperfectives of these verbs as iteratives, i.e. *I am hitting him (repeatedly).*

Then, there's the tense particles, which follow a verb- for example:

Súu saya panya náa.
FOCUS 1P stop PST
I stopped.

There are three main particles, one of which has two forms:

- *náa*, the particle in the previous sentence. It marks a generic past tense event and requires no change in the prior verb, cf. *panya* above. It is the simplest and by far the most widely used of all the particles. It is not obligatory but is used more often than not with past events.

- *kìi,* a particle with a recent past tense encoding (It is roughly approximated in English by *I recently X*). It is optionally used, and is not as common as *náa*. In a sentence where *kíi* as applicable, people rarely use *náa*. An important detail about *kìi* is that it requires the prior verb to be placed in the infinitive, so *I just stopped* would be *súu saya panyaye kìi*, with *panya* in the infinitive. More on this in section 3.2, The Infinitive.

- *ta,* a particle that marks the future. It is not obligatory and is used optionally, at the speaker's will. It requires the prior verb to be in the infinitive as well, but unlike *kìi*, it has multiple forms, so more information can be expressed with *ta*. It only has one other form, *táa*, used for marking the irrealis or imperfective. More on the "irrealis" in section 3.4, Negation.

3.2 The Infinitive

This section will be all about- you guessed it- the infinitive. The infinitive has quite a lot to do, so let's get started. The infinitive is marked with *-ye* and, as a nonfinite verb form, cannot take any more morphology. Here are some uses of the infinitive.

The simplest use of the infinitive is in auxiliary verb constructions, so let's start there. Here's an example of an auxiliary verb construction with the infinitive.

Súu saya kiwu làagáye panya náa.

FOCUS 1P 2P hit-INF stop PST
I stopped hitting you

Here we have a prototypical auxiliary verb construction in Gbawáa. The main verb is placed in the infinitive, with the auxiliary following it. Overall, very simple. Different auxiliary verb constructions will take the infinitive vs. the converbs for the main verb.

Next is the other main use of the infinitive, with the particles *ta* and *kìi,* as detailed in section 3.1, Tense and Aspect. Here is an example sentence:

Súu saya panyaye kìi
FOCUS 1P stop-INF. REC.PST
I recently stopped

The final use of the infinitive is as an imperative, which satisfies the insubordination requirement by having a nonfinite form used in finite clauses, in this case, imperative clauses.

Ye panyaye!
FOCUS stop-INF
Stop!

In intransitive imperatives, the generic focus classifier *ye* is used. The verb is marked with the infinitive and the subject (*you*) does not appear in the sentence. A vocative is often used at the speaker's preference when referring to the subject (e.g. English *quiet, you*! Although no less polite than without a vocative) For example, the sentence in Section 2.5. illustrates this well.

Kpuò panyaye, kizá e!
FOCUS stop-INF. cat VOC
Stop, cat!

3.3 Converbs

Gbawáa makes use of two converbs, an imperfective converb (which signals that the verb in the converb clause took place at the same time as the main verb) and a perfective converb, which signals that the verb in the converb clause took place before the main verb. The imperfective converb is marked with *-bi,* while the perfective converb is marked with *-san*.

3.4 Negation

Negation in Gbawáa is relatively straightforward, like other aspects of the verbal system. The first component of the negative is the "irrealis" marker *-ga*. *-ga* marks clauses that are either yes/no questions or negative statements. It appears after all other markers in the verb complex. Here is an example of *-ga*'s use:

Súu saya kiwu làagága?
FOCUS 1P 2P hit-IRR.
Did I hit you?

Here we can see that *-ga* without any other marking has a yes/no question meaning. However, to encode a negative sentence, the particle *mìe* is placed sentence initially, even before the focus classifier. Here's an example (just the previous example, with *mìe*)

Mìe sùu saya kiwu làagágа
NEG FOCUS 1P 2P hit-IRR.
I didn't hit you

This fulfills the requirement of asymmetric negation- the clause must be marked with an extra non-real marker (in this case, one that marks yes-no questions) so it does not just add a simple negative marker to a standard clause. It is also asymmetric in that although positive yes-no questions can be asked, negative yes-no questions (which often have a presupposed meaning in English) don't exist.

There's also an irrealis form of the future tense particle *ta, táa,* which is just signified by high tone and lengthening of the vowel. It is identical to the imperfective form of the particle. For more on this and the system of tense particles, see Section 3.1, Tense and Aspect.

3.5 Politeness

Finally, we get to politeness, the final bit of the verbal system that I've fleshed out. The politeness suffix is *-we*, and it is placed in between the imperfective and irrealis markers. This marker shows general politeness towards the listener. It is used very commonly and is only not used with close friends, or with verb endings that cannot take it, such as the infinitive. It is also not used when one does not care about being polite or is being blunt with someone. It is extremely commonplace and is more often than not used in the language. With questions there is a separate postverbal particle placed after the sentence to encode a polite question, *te*, although the irrealis suffix is also used. Here are two example sentences illustrating the polite and polite question forms:

Súu saya taawawe
FOCUS 1P be.scared-POL
I am scared / I fear (something)

Súu saya taawaga te?
FOCUS 1P be.scared-IRR. POL.Q
Am I scared?

5. Other Classes

4.1. Pronouns

Gbawáa has an open class of pronouns, of which I am required to provide 15. Here they are.

- *saya*, a generic first person pronoun. Can be used by anyone but is mostly used by men.
- *kiwu,* a generic second person pronoun of no real politeness level.
- *dayun,* a second person pronoun used for someone of higher status.
- *siga,* a second person pronoun used with older family members.
- *mo'o,* a pronoun used by married women to refer to themselves

- *sadi,* a third person pronoun used for liquids
- *diezo,* a second person pronoun used by teachers to refer to their pupils
- *sienda,* a third person pronoun used to refer affectionately to one's pet
- *táadì,* a pronoun used with one's significant other
- *tedo,* a generic third person pronoun for men
- *síiyìe,* a generic third person pronoun for women
- *tàazí,* a second person pronoun used with people in political office
- *sienwa,* a pronoun used in the Northern Cities with coworkers of the same status.
- *dago,* a pronoun used in the Northern Cities to refer to a boss of some sort
- *na'u*, a pronoun used when speaking to different family's patriarch[2]
- *sayo,* a pronoun used when speaking to your own family's patriarch

4.2. Adjectives

Details to be added later.

4.3. Other Adpositional Constructions

Details to be added later.

6. Example Sentences

Here are five example sentences I've chosen to translate into Gbawáa, as per the rules of the challenge.

Sentence 1

[*He] is seeking to take a pear, [and] took one, but is afraid*." (5MOYD #1426)

Un mìidán íizà káazòye tadazan, káazòzan, tedo taawawe
FOCUS pear INDEF-CL take-INF want-PFV.CONV take-PFV.CONV 3P be.scared-POL
He wanted to take a pear, and took (one), but is now afraid

Sentence 2

We went to the village for a visit. (Zephyrus Sentence #45)

Súu mìizébi saya ieye muongbawe náa
FOCUS arrive-IMP.CONV 1P village visit-POL PST
We went to the village for a visit (lit. Traveling, we visited the village)

Sentence 3

Be careful. (Zephyrus Sentence #108)

Ye dagoye.

[2] The oldest man in your family; for speakers living in the Northern Cities who may not live near their family's patriarch, it is used when speaking to their fathers.

FOCUS be.careful-INF.
Be careful.

Sentence 4

Slowly she looked around. (Zephyrus Sentence #25)

Súu mimibi síiyìe da síiyìe ùo minyo dayu nàa.
FOCUS be.slow-IMP.CONV 3P REL 3P COP eye scatter PST
Slowly she looked around.

Sentence 5

You must write more neatly. (Zephyrus Sentence #37)

Súu kubi sonabi talaye.
FOCUS more.often be.clean-IMP.CONV write.INF
You must write more neatly.