Orthography Theories and the Standard Igbo Orthography

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Abstract

The attempt to produce a good orthography assumes the five basic principles of accuracy, consistency, convenience, harmonization and familiarity (Williamson, 1984:7). These five principles are encoded in a number of orthographic theories.

In this paper we investigate the contribution of a number of orthographic theories to the standardization of Igbo orthography. The aim is to highlight the consistency or otherwise of Igbo orthography with these theories, and also, to make suggestions, if any, for reforms

Key words: orthography theories, standard Igbo, spelling rules,

1.0. Introduction

There are two approaches to the study of orthographies. The first is the *a priori* approach while the second is the *a posteriori* viewpoint. In the *a priori* study of orthographies, the concern is about written orthographies, while the *a posteriori* aspect deals with a language that has a long written tradition. The objectives of an *a posteriori* orthography study are to discuss the merits and demerits of an established orthography. In other words, the researchers interested in *a posteriori* orthographies investigate the consistency/inconsistency and accuracy of the written language and make recommendations for the updating of such orthographies, if the need arises. This means that *a posteriori* orthography research is aimed at drawing the attention of the users of the language to the need for correct spelling and writing rules.

On the other hand, an *a priori* approach is a pilot study of an emerging orthography of a language. Its concern is the linguistic analysis of the language in order to produce the orthography of the language. The researchers focus on the phonology, morphology and the syntax of the language. These studies would enable the spoken form of the language to be reduced to a written form that is easy to learn and efficient for communication.

The study of Igbo orthography is neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. This is because, although Igbo has been reduced to writing, it does not have a long written tradition, when compared to say Arabic, English and French. The earliest written form of the language began in 1861 (Oraka, 1983:25), when J.F. Schon, a Christian missionary adopted the Lepsius orthography of 1854 writing his *Oku Ibo:Grammatical Elements of the Ibo language*. The Church Mission Society (C.M.S) published *An Ibo primer*, written by a catechist, F.W. Smart in 1870. According to

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Oraka (1983), by 1883 about 50 books including the bible has been published in Igbo, all of them based on the Lepsius orthography.

However, by 1929, the Lepsius orthography was abandoned for the Africa orthography designed by the International Institute of African Languages and Culture (IIALC). This was because of the enactment of a decree by the colonial authorities which adopted the Africa orthography. This led to the now famous great Igbo orthography controversy that lasted for 32 years. This period was a setback for the development of a standard Igbo orthography. The resolution of this controversy came about in 1961, when the then Eastern Nigerian Government adopted a standard orthography, popularly known as the Ọnwu orthography. This orthography is made up of the following 36 graphemes <a, b, ch, d, e, f, g, gb, gh, gw, h, I, ị, j, k, kp, kw, l, m, n, ñ, nw, ny, ọ, p, r, s, sh, t, u, ụ v, w, y, z>. There are 8 vowels in the Igbo and nine of the consonants are digraphs. These are ch, gb, gh, gw, kp, kw, nw, ny, sh. The rest of them are monographs. Emenanjo (1996) discloses that the consonant <sh> and <v> are not 'freely found in words like others.' They are mostly found in dialect words. See Emenanjo, (1996:4) for details of Igbo alphabets.

This brief history of Igbo orthography is to illustrate the fact that Igbo does not really have a long written tradition, if its standard orthography only came into existence in 1961. In this work, we situate Igbo standard orthography as not yet fully definitive due to its young history. It is still being learned and internalized. Again, the dominance of English affects its learnability. Nevertheless, a study of the Igbo orthography and its co-relation to orthographic theories would shed light on its learnability and standardization.

2.0 Traditional Orthographies and the Igbo Standard Orthography

Traditional orthographies include the orthographies of Arabic, English, French and German and all other languages that have long written traditions. The designing of orthographies for unwritten languages take their cues from these traditional orthographies. A study of these established orthographies reveals some inconsistencies between the spoken form and the written form. These inconsistencies stem from the fact of their long history, where certain written forms have evolved without correspondence to the written form (for example, English). There are also linguistic reasons for these inconsistencies. However, the most glaring form of inconsistency is between the phoneme and the grapheme of English. The example in (1) below illustrates how the phoneme /i/ in English is inconsistent with the graphemes. <e>, <o>, <u>, <ui> and <y>. Koffi (2009:40).

1.

a. begin

b. women

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c. busy

d. build

e. abyss

In the spoken form of the words in (1a-e), the phoneme /i/ is represented by the graphemes, <e>, <o>, <u>, <ui> and <y>, respectively. This kind of inconsistency is termed the many-to-one correspondence (cited from Vallins, 1993 in Koffi (2009). This kind of inconsistency is not found in Igbo orthography as we shall illustrate shortly.

The other type of inconsistency and inaccuracy in traditional orthographies is the one-to-many correspondence. Here, one grapheme is used to represent a number of phonemes. We shall illustrate (2) below, where the grapheme <c> represents the phonemes /k/ and /s/.

2.

a. character

b. culminate

c. Celtic

d. census

e. celebrate

In example (2a-e) the grapheme <c> is used to represent the phoneme /k/ in (2a-c) and the phoneme /s/ in (2d-e). Williamson, (1984) quoting Wolf (1954:8) emphasizes that 'consistency means that any letter or letter combination should stand for the same sound or sounds throughout the system'. Examples (1) and (2) above show that the traditional orthography of English fails this test. In example (3) we demonstrate that Igbo orthography does not have the failings of the many-to-one correspondence and one-to-many correspondence of English.

3.

/i/ ⟶ <i>

i. ìsé   'five'

ii. íjè   'journey'

iii. àgìdì   'corn meal'

iv. nri   'food'

v. uhie   'camwood'

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The phoneme /i/ is pronounced the way it is spelt in examples (3i-vi). This emphasizes consistency in Igbo orthography. This consistency is further illustrated with the phoneme /I/, a central vowel, which is pronounced the way it is spelt.

4.

/I/→ <ị>

a. ịtọ   'three'

b. iba   'malaria fever'

c. ntị   'ear'

d. ahịa   'market'

e. ụbịam 'poverty'

The ability of Igbo orthography to represent one grapheme with only one phoneme coincides with the principles of consistency in a good orthography. It is an advantage to both the native speaker and second language learner who will find out that the knowledge of the phonetic chart and the phonemes of Igbo can be applied directly to its spelling rules.

The traditional orthography of English is also defective in the representation of mute letters. These letters are redundant in the spelling of words and add to the difficulty in learning the spelling rules of English. It is also one of the hallmarks of inconsistency of English. In example (5) we show the mute letters in the English words.

5.

a. pneumonia

b.gnome

c. subtle

d. knife

e. phone

In (5a) the mute grapheme <p> is redundant and serves no function in the spelling of that word. Likewise, the mute graphemes <g>, <b> and <k> in (5b-d) are also not useful. The grapheme <ph> is completely out of place because the pronunciation of the letter produces the phoneme /f/.

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Igbo orthography has done well to avoid these redundant letters because all the words in Igbo are spelt as they are spoken. Example (6) illustrates.

6.

/ada/ ⟶ àdá 'first daughter'

/isi/ ⟶ isi 'head'

/IsI/ ⟶ ísì 'smell'

/ɔkɷ/ ⟶ ọ̀kụ́ 'fire'

/azɷ/ ⟶ azù 'fish'

A careful look at examples (6a-e) indicates that the spoken form of the words in phonemic symbols correspond to the written form. There are no mute letters in the orthography. In other words, in terms of the principle of consistency, Igbo orthography is well structured for learners to avoid spelling errors.

3.0 Phonetic and Phonemic Orthography

A phonetic orthography aims at an accurate production of the spoken form of the language in writing, while a phonemic orthography is designed in such a way that a grapheme is pronounced the same way as its phoneme. Jones (1967) and Sgall (1987) subscribe to the view that orthography should be such that its phonemes enables the production of its graphemes. On the other hand, Koffi (2009) quoting Vachek (1945) and Smalley (1964) argue against a phonetic orthography. Their reason is that the objective of orthography is to produce a realistic representation of the spoken form of a language in writing while the aim of phonetics is to produce accurately the spoken language.

In other words, a phonemic orthography produces phonemes of a given language in the orthography. Sgall (1987) observes that in any orthography, the grapheme should be pronounced like the phoneme. Similarly, the phoneme should be written as the grapheme. In other words, phoneme and grapheme should have a consistent correspondence in sound. Jones (1967) and Sgall (1987) state that the phonemic orthography is the model orthography and should be used as the standard. Following Jones (1967) and Sgall (1987), we claim that the Igbo standard orthography is a phonemic orthography and this feature makes it close to other standard orthographies. The following examples in (7) below provide data to support our claim.

7.

a. /awɔ/ ⟶ áwọ̀ 'frog'

b. /mgbIrIgba/ ⟶ mgbịrịgba 'bell'

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c./akʷɷ/ ⟶ àkwú   'palmfruit'

d. /ogʷɷ/ ⟶ ọ́gwụ̀   'medicine'

e./ɷbɔtsI/ ⟶ ụ́bọ̀chị̀   'day'

Note that the phonemes in (7) appear both in phonemic brackets and in the graphemes of Igbo. Note also that the pronunciation of the words in the phonemic brackets sound alike to the words in graphemes on the right. More so, the phonemes are written as the graphemes. This is why the light vowels (-ATR) have the sub-dot diacritic to differentiate them from the heavy vowels (+ATR) without the sub-dots. In addition, the doubly articulated consonants /gʷ/, /kʷ/ and /gᵇ/ are written as the graphemes. These examples abound in Igbo words proving that it is a phonemic orthography which is the accepted standard for orthographies (Jones, 1967: Sgall, 1987).

4.0 The Theories of Orthography

The adoption of a phonemic orthography also comes with the adherence to some orthography principles. This adherence makes for an orthography that is acceptable to all stakeholders especially, in cases like Igbo orthography where there still exist debates about the suitability of the orthography for the language. These principles have originated from the long study of orthographies over the years by linguists and enthusiasts. In the following sections, we shall discuss some of these principles and find out how they affect Igbo orthography

4.1 The Easy Acquisition Theory

Wiseman (1989) is the advocate of this theory. He states that orthography should sound familiar to the native speaker. When the native speaker feels comfortable with the sound of the alphabets of the orthography, it makes it easier for learning. However, Ugorji (2002; 2005a; 2009) has frowned at the Igbo standard orthography for not representing the unique speech sounds of some Igbo dialects. Indeed, Ugorji, (2009) proposes a 'sociophonological model for Igbo orthography'. This position stipulates that the orthography should not contain phonemes but sociophonemes, which he defines as 'all properties of spoken language which bear sociolinguistic significance for language or dialect communities.' Ugorji (2009) position is more or less linguistic activism and the aim according to him is to vitalize dialect communities. This position is also an echo of Emenanjo, (1995) where he advises that

> Written standard Igbo will have to
> grapple with the problems of
> handling dialect morphemes, words,
> phrases, idiomatic expressions,

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proverbs, tongue twisters etc which
by implication will come in expected
avalanches into Standard Igbo.

Emenanjo (1995:221)

Emenanjo, (1995) believes that the Onwu orthography needs a number of 'essential' and 'crucial' changes to make it 'morphophonemic, pan-dialectal and self-consistent'. The argument is that the standard Igbo orthography, for now, does not contain all the significant sounds in all Igbo dialects. The sound-letter correspondence is not consistent and familiar to the native speakers of some dialects. The adjustment needed in the orthography has to make it able to accommodate all dialectal phonemes and morphemes which will result in the enrichment of the orthography

4.2 The Easy Learning of Other Languages

A good orthography should make it easy for the native speaker to learn other languages. In the same vein, foreigners should find it easy to learn the language. This is possible only if the design of the orthography follows standard orthography theories and principles. Fortunately, Igbo orthography adopts the Latin alphabets with minor variations especially in the representation of diacritics and diagraphs. Therefore, a native speaker of Igbo, who has acquired the knowledge of the orthography, should be able to easily learn English, Yoruba and other Nigerian languages that have Latin alphabets in their orthographies.

The use of special symbols in other languages to represent sounds not found in Igbo should not be difficult to learn by the native speaker. These special symbols always almost have a Latin base. In the case of the second language learner of Igbo, the diacritics and digraphs in the orthography are basically derived from Latin. Therefore it is easy to learn.

4.3 The Spelling and Alternate Spelling Theory

This spelling theory stipulates that each word should be written the way it is pronounced in isolation. Our examples in Section 3.0 illustrate these facts. In the alternate spelling theory, it is postulated that when two spellings have equal claims to representation in the orthography, it is advisable to admit the two spelling forms. This brings to mind the criticism of the standard orthography for not representing the sounds of some dialects. As Emenanjo, (1996) observes, in some dialects spoken in Central Igbo areas, 'people use **v** where others use **b** as in Mbaise

Mbaise	Standard Igbo	
ìvù	Ìbù	'fatness'
mvọ	Mbọ	'finger nails'
ịvọ	Ịbọ	'dissect'

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According to the theory being discussed, the alternative spellings above should be admitted in the orthography since both letters **v** and **b** are represented in the orthography.

4.4 The Simplicity Theory

This theory stipulates that the dialect with the simplest phonological and morphosyntactic rules should form the basis of the orthography. The standard Igbo orthography is based on the dialects of Central Igbo and Onitsha (Emenanjo, 1975b:1996). The literature available to us has not indicated the phonological and morphosyntactic reasons supporting Central and Onitsha Igbo as the standard. There are only historical reasons to address this fact. In fact, Oraka (1983) citing Emenanjo, (1983) reveals that the Onwụ or Standard orthography was accepted because 'the Catholics who favoured Onitsha were given the Onitsha letters of the alphabets, while the Protestants who favoured the central dialects were allowed to continue so but using the Onitsha sound system.' By these words, it is clear that the standard Igbo orthography is a 'pacifying' orthography. It was not based on the fact that Central and Onitsha Igbo have the simplest morphophonological rules but simply to resolve an age-old issue that had hampered the development of Igbo. This leads us to the next theory of orthography.

4.5 The Theory of Social Acceptability

Simmons (1977) proposes the principle of social acceptability. This principle affirms that the most socially acceptable solution to an orthography problem is to be preferred. The resolution of the orthography crisis in 1961 by the Ọnwụ Committee was socially acceptable to both the government and the missionaries who were major stakeholders, and also to the generality of Igbo people represented by the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC). The SPILC was at the vanguard of popularizing the use of the Onwu orthography in schools, colleges and by examination bodies. The SPILC also organized seminars and published books that encouraged people to learn and use the standard orthography. Professor Nwanolue Emenanjo, a most excellent Igbo scholar contributed immensely to the popularization of the orthography by his profuse publications in Igbo studies based on the standard orthography.

4.6 The Minimal Ambiguity theory

The use of this theory is for the resolution of possible ambiguities in the spelling rules of the language. Simmons (1977) propounded the theory. The SPILC followed the stipulations of this theory when they introduced the mechanics of writing Igbo as discussed in the Volume 1 of their publication. The following example in (8) shows some of the recommendations made in order to resolve all potential ambiguities in the writing of Igbo.

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8.

a. nani instead of naani   'only'

b. ndewo instead of ndeewo   'how is it'

c. nwanyi instead of nwaanyị   'woman'

d. ụnyahụ instead of ụnyaahụ   'yesterday'

e. niile instead of niile   'all'

These recommendations were made because the committee believes that the elision of the vowels is unjustified. This is because Igbo words are spelt as spoken with all their syllables. The strong recommendation that tones should be fully marked also sets out to minimize ambiguities in words. As Emenanjo (1996:33) recommends, 'in a tone language, it is better to over-spell a word with all its syllables and tone marks than to under-spell with elided syllables and no tone marks.'

The solution proffered by the SPILC and Emenanjo (1996) tend to give the greatest contribution towards resolving spelling ambiguities.

4.7 Tone Economy Theory

Williamson (1984:42) recommends that in marking the tones of a language; the most common tone in the language may be left unmarked. This is where the Tone Economy theory is derived. For Emenanjo (1996) 'it is better to leave out marking high tones.' Other Igbo scholars (Green & Igwe, 1963; Uwalaka, 1997) also follow the Tone Economy theory leaving out the marking of all high tones.

4.8 The Theory of Punctuation

In designing Orthography, the punctuation system should have resemblance to the punctuation marks used in other familiar languages. This theory is from Mudhenk (1981) according to Koffi (2009).

Igbo derives it punctuation system from English. They include 'the full-stop, comma, semi-colon, colon, exclamation mark, question mark, quotation marks, apostrophe, parenthesis and square brackets' (Emenanjo, 1996:77). The function of these punctuation marks in Igbo is similar to their functions in English.

4.9 The Etymology Demand Theory

In this principle, a word's spelling must reflect its source (Cummings, 1988). The debate about writing compound words reflects the facts of this theory. While Ikekeọnwụ (2011) recommends

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that compound words should be written together, Onukawa (2011) proposes that compound words should be written apart. We illustrate with examples taken directly from the works of these two scholars. First are the examples of compound words written together.

9.

a. úlò̩+ úkà ⟶ úlò̩u̩ka   'church'

b. élu + igwe ➤ eluigwe   'sky'

c. úlò̩ + akwu̩kwo̩ ⟶ úlò̩akwu̩kwo̩ 'school'

d. ù̩tó + ású̩sú̩ ⟶ ù̩tó̩asú̩su̩ 'grammar'

<div align="right">Ikeke̩nwu̩ (2011:4)</div>

The examples in (10) are compound words written apart

10.

a. nwa akwukwo   'student'

b.ezi okwu   'truth'

c. ahu̩ o̩nu̩   'beard'

d. aka ekpe   'left hand'

<div align="right">Onukawa, (2011:12)</div>

Following the Etymological demand theory, the two sets of examples have some words whose concepts are inherent to the Igbo speaker's world view while other words have concepts that come from language contact. For example, (9a, c and d and 10a) are free translations which are sourced from the English language. These words should be written apart to show that their sources are from outside the language. Examples (9b, 10b, c and d) are concepts within the Igbo worldview and should be written together.

5.0 Conclusion

Section 4 above discusses in an extensive way the correlation between the standard Igbo orthography and a number of orthography theories that have emanated from long term research on the subject. Our discussion demonstrates that the design of the Igbo standard orthography wittingly or otherwise, follows the theories of orthography design. The various activities of Igbo scholars and language promoters also adhere to these theories and principles. This goes to show that although the orthography is not perfect; its design has a lot of merits in it.

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One major contentious issue about the orthography is that it does not have room for all the sounds found in Igbo dialects. This is a major issue which has been addressed by a number of Igbo scholars (Emenanjo, 1995; Ugorji, 2005a; 2009). This problem in the orthography is also against the theory of easy learning of the writing rules by the native speakers, who may not find the sound-letter correspondence consistent with that of his dialect. One recurring solution that has been proffered is the convocation of a Pan-Igbo Orthography Summit where this issue can be evenly addressed. In this paper, we lend credence to this call based on our analysis of the conformity of Igbo orthography to orthography theories. Ohiri-Aniche (2007) affirms that an international workshop on Igbo orthography should be convened as quickly as possible. The aim of this workshop should be to 'reconcile' and 'harmonize' the conflicting observations on the writing and spelling of Igbo. She proposes that one of the terms of reference is for the summit to produce a separate orthography for writing in the dialects while the standard orthography remains for writing standard Igbo. Ugorji (2009) re-emphasis this by stating that the new set of orthography should be seen as supplementary to the standard orthography and used mainly for teaching and learning the language. Emenanjo, (1995) asserts that this new set of orthography will not resurface the old orthography controversy but would establish a more inclusive orthography which will even make standard Igbo a more effective tool for writing literature in the dialects.

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