ORTHOGRAPHICAL INCONSISTENCIES AND IGBO LEXICOGRAPHY

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Abstract
This paper aims at analysing how lexicography is a veritable source for resolving inconsistencies in and controversies on Igbo orthography. The specific objectives include: to identify the aspects of the Igbo orthography that have been controversial; ssecondly, to determine why those aspects of the orthography are deemed unacceptable. Furthermore, it identifies lexicographic methods of resolving such controversies with particular reference to the Igbo language. The paper adopts a descriptive analytical approach. The paper finds out that the standard Igbo orthography has been a subject of controversy on account of the incomprehensive nature of the alphabet, the differences in the tone marking convention, the non-recognition of some contrastive features such as nasalisation, aspiration, palatalisation and inconsistent representation of labialisation in the standard variety. The source of the inconsistency is traceable to the origin of the orthography. The orthography was fashioned out by westerners whose languages had features that were quite different from those of Igbo. They took a clue from the sound system of their language to devise the Igbo alphabet. The result was obviously erroneous in part. After the initial effort at the alphabet, there ensued what came to be called the orthography controversy. The controversy was resolved dramatically but unscientifically in 1961. Many of the teething problems remained, with a tacit understanding not to reawaken such controversy again. The importance of lexicography as a means of resolving such controversies comes to the fore. The most important lexicographic means of resolving such problems identified here is the use of transcription. This method makes identical features with disparate orthographic representations converge at the same standardised linguistic form.

1. Introduction

Using language involves combining the relevant words in the lexicon of the language to achieve effect. It involves, most of the time, a special repetition of the phonemes, morphemes and lexical items of the language, in a way that does not result in linguistic redundancies but makes sense. The temporal nature of the spoken form inspires an attempt to reduce the spoken to a system of writing, which is durable and a mirror image of the spoken. Thus, what appears to be a limitless number of sounds is systematically reduced to a finite set of sounds. The wonder of language is made manifest as a finite set of sounds contrastively generates an infinite number of language tokens that express the need and experience of an ethnic group.

Part of the aspirations of all ethnic groups is to archive their experiences in histories that paint their pictures of all epochs of their evolution. The art of so doing which has proved to be one of the greatest human inventions is writing.

The history of writing in different languages differs. This is because in some societies, the history of writing is tied to their political history. Over the years, some societies have influenced the others through war, colonisation, commerce, religion and imperialism. In some instances, the influence is in dictating the writing system of the language of the influenced state. In rare cases does one have a writing system where there is a one to one correspondence between the spoken and written form. The mismatch results from the differences between the language of the colonial state and that of the colonised state. In some cases, post independence pressures inspire the decolonisation of the writing system left by the colonial master. This leads to an implosion of controversies that never gets satisfactorily resolved.

The problem of this paper is therefore to find out how lexicography can be used as a resourceful means of systematically unifying discrepancies in Igbo orthography.

2. Theoretical background

There does not appear to be a consistent body of theoretical assumptions of orthographical design. The existent semiotic guidelines are more of hypotheses, which do not appear to have a universal tendency. It does appear that no language in the world has a perfect orthography. The anxiety of scholars centres on how to reduce the imperfections. It is in the bid to get around the problem that the International Phonetic Association periodically reviews the phonemes of the languages of the world to unify the vagaries of the individual language orthography design and the actual sound rendition. In view of the foregoing, therefore, for the purpose of this study, the guideline set by Williamson (2004) will be reviewed.

Williamson (2004) identifies five principles of orthography design. They include accuracy, consistency, convenience, harmonisation and familiarity. She defines accuracy to mean the quality of orthography to have different ways of writing all the significant sounds or phonemes of the language. Elugbe (2003) has used the Agbarho dialect of the Urhobo language to determine the limits of accuracy in the design of orthographies. Consistency, according to Williamson (2004:8), means, “if the same sound or word is always written the same way wherever it appears” (cf. Bamgbose, 1962). This is a reiteration of the earlier claim of Wolff (1954:8), who posits, “consistency means that any letter or letter combination should stand for the same sound or sounds throughout the system”. She points out that English is not a good example here. English writes the same vowel sound in different ways as in ‘pen’, ‘dead’ and

'again'. Furthermore, 'f' is inconsistently written in English in 'philosophy', 'rough' and 'fish'. She argues that orthography should divide words or word combinations consistently. Here too, she observes that in English, there is no consistent way of writing some phrasal combination. Sometimes, such a combination is written as a single word, or with a hyphen or separate words, such as 'palmnut', 'palm-nut' or 'palm nut' (See also Mbah, 2018 p. 37). She argues that the situation is worse in Nigerian languages (including Igbo). In her words,

> In many Nigerian languages, the situation is much worse. Because of lack of practice in writing, many people are very uncertain how to divide up words and there is great confusion in writing. A good orthography avoids such uncertainty by making definite rules about how to divide words (p.9)

The third quality of a good orthography is convenience. Here, she argues that orthography must be convenient to use and graphise; otherwise, users may seize to worry about writing it correctly. She gives a caveat, however, which gives effect to the possibility of violating accuracy on the altar of convenience. She therefore ranks the quality of accuracy and consistency above convenience.

Convenience does not appear to be a measurable term in the contemporary world, where the rate of development and use of certain infrastructure are determined by the few inventors and proprietors of technology. For instance, the manufacturers and designers of the computers recognise certain letters of the alphabet as cardinal symbols. Incidentally, most of these icons are based on their languages or the letters of the international languages. Some of the letters of languages such as Igbo are reduced to secondary letters that are sourced from 'more symbols' which are laborious, picketing to retrieve and or type. The other alternative way is to as use software. This method makes adjustments in the keys to substitute available keys in the standard keyboard with the keys, which are not contained in the keyboard but improvised for the language. This method raises the issue of compatibility. Computer systems, which do not have this software reject the typescript as incompatible and translate the incompatible symbols to obnoxious and unreadable symbols. This scenario is even worse with supra-segments such as tone. Convenience does not therefore appear to be a current quality of orthography design especially when considering typing and printing.

Harmonisation is the fourth principle, which Williamson (2004) identifies. She agrees with Wolff (1954) to the effect that harmonisation refers to the quality of orthography being similar to

other orthographies especially contiguous ones. She lays emphasis on this criterion in the following quotation:

> Many languages are spoken in Nigeria and most Nigerians speak more than one language. It is therefore important that each orthography should be as similar to the other orthographies as much as possible. .... If the orthographies of different languages are vastly different, the task of re-adjusting to the new orthography may prove to be very discouraging..... If a letter is used in one language to represent a certain sound, every effort should be made to avoid using that same letter to represent a completely different sound in another language (p.10)

As elegant as this postulation might sound, certain languages think of harmonisation in terms of domination. Yoruba, for instance, uses /p/ where most languages use /kp/ despite the gross limitation of this symbol especially when faced with borrowed words. The same language is confused about how to write the voiceless palatal sound /ʃ/. It writes it sometimes as 's' and at other times as 'sh' or 'ṣ'. Some languages and separate dialects of the same language, for some socio-political exigency and or fear of domination, commission their orthography to vary distinctly from the other perceived adversarial orthographies. Such avoidance approach harmonises orthographies only when forced by the limitation of dissension. A typical example is the Echie and Ikwere lects of Igbo. Though nasalisation is symbolised by writing a tilde over the nasalised sound in Igbo, these lects write 'n' after the sound to indicate nasalisation. These lects appear to believe that they belong to a different language other than Igbo. Mbah (2003) is of the opinion that this position does not have any linguistic support.

The last quality of orthography design identified in Williamson (2004) is familiarity. By this, she claims that for orthography to attract patronage, the letters of such orthography must be familiar; changing many familiar things in a new orthography renders the orthography controversial. This same opinion had earlier been expressed by Bamgbose (1965) and Pike (1947). The orthography controversy in Igbo studies proves this position right. Consequently, she recommends either of the following alternatives:

(a) Limited to making improvements in accuracy, consistency or convenience or
(b) Bringing the orthography closer to that of neighbouring languages, particularly major ones, through harmonisation.

The sixth quality, which may be added, is comprehensiveness. Orthographies should as much as possible be representative of the contrastive features of the varieties making up the language. When the phonemes of a variety of language are left out of the standard orthography, it leads to agitations and ultimately to either reform or separatist tendencies. The residue of the orthography controversy in Igbo revolves around comprehensiveness (cf. Echeruo, 1975, Emenanjo, 1975, 1978, Nwachukwu, 1983). In Igbo, the deletion of the pharyngealised mid vowel 'ẹ' from the standard Igbo alphabet has made identification, describing, and theorising difficult in the language. With the official creation of Ẹbọnyị state, nothing again detracts from its being recognised as a vowel in the language. Indeed, all the dialects of Igbo have the vowel and it is also contrastive in these dialects. Furthermore, it will be foolhardiness not to recognise it in view of its recurrence in borrowed words. Current orthography designs adjust indigenous alphabets to accommodate letters, which recur in borrowed words. Otherwise, contracting such borrowed words within the limits of the indigenous letters misrepresents the words, misleads the speakers in pronouncing them and sometimes leads to social embarrassment.

A highlight of orthographical inconsistencies in Igbo

Much has been written on the controversy surrounding the Igbo orthography. The controversies can be divided into two, namely alphabetic and lexico-phrasal. The first centres around the popular orthography controversy. This controversy argues about whose variety of Igbo should be used and which letter of the alphabet should be included in the alphabet. This controversy was officially settled in 1961. References to this version of the orthography controversy may be got from Achebe (1971), Afigbo (Ed.) (1995), Echeruo (1972), Emenanjo (1975, 1978, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1995), Eze (2001), Green and Igwe (1963), Ikekeonwu (1986), Mbah (2003), Okebalama (2004), Mbah & Mbah (2010), Nwachukwu (1983), Nwadike (2000), Oha (2001), Uguru (2002) et cetera.

Green and Igwe (1963) is one of the first scholars that agitated against the Onwu alphabet and for the inclusion of nasalised, aspirated and other secondary articulation features that are contrastive in the standard Igbo alphabet. Nwachukwu (1983) Uwalaka (1988), have consistently published in these dialect forms, namely, the Mbaise dialect. Okebalama (2004) reiterates this position and makes a clarion call for the inclusion of these dialect forms in the alphabet of the

standard form. There is no doubt that the illustrations they furnish are distinctive. For instance, Okebalama (2004) has some of the following examples:

1. (a) ara – madness ~ aŵa - breast

   (b)ịba – malaria ~ ịbha - to enter

   (c) pịa –flog ~ pya – carve
   (d) àbụá – two ~ àkwá - egg

1a-b shows where nasalisation is distinctive; 1c illustrates contrastive aspiration features, and 1d demonstrates labialisation as a distinctive feature in Igbo. Mbah and Mbah (2000) argue for the inclusion of the mid half close pharyngealised vowel in the Igbo alphabet. They argue that the sound is phonemic and can be observed in all the dialects of the language. They illustrate their claim with the following examples

2. (a) ẹgba – appointment ~ agba – jaw
   (b) ẹnwụ - bee ~ anwụ- sunlight
   (c) ẹnyụ - pumpkin ~ anyụ- axe
   (d) ẹtụ - chewing stick ~ atụ - buffalo
   (e) ẹja – sacrifice – aja – night driver bird
   (f) ẹha – name ~ aha – perforating
   (g) ẹnya – eye ~ anya – a type of tree

Mbah (2021) has to a large extent shown how productive the phoneme is in the language. Another area of problem is the fallout of the standardisation debates during the days of Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture. It was suggested by Ogbalu that in order to reduce the number of diacritic marks in writing Igbo, words ending in the mid back vowel (ọ) should be written as (or). The suggestion was not accepted. However, in proper names, such forms as Okafor, Orba. Orsu, Mbajiorgu and Ozor are seen. Further to this, other aberrations as Aloh, Mbah, Odoh, Oduah are common. These are problematic for the novitiate lexicographer.

Another area of problem is the anglicised Igbo names, which resulted from the attempt by the white missionaries to reduce some Igbo names to writing. Such names as Awka, Awgu, Ihitte, Nsukka, Awlaw, Asaba, Umuahia and Onitsha are sources of orthographical inconsistency. Though these names have stuck orthographically, lexicography is a veritable source of rending them in their proper forms. It is important to observe here that the Tiv have corrected similar

aberrations in their language. For instance, Oturkpo has been amended as Otukpo, which is the correct form.

Tone marking is another area of Igbo orthography that is inconsistent. Though, notionally, all the tone marking conventions are based on the same principle, their method of so doing differs. There are two competing conventions. One of the conventions recommends that the high tone should be left unmarked whereas the raised hyphen and grave accent mark should be used to indicate the down stepped and low tones respectively, e.g.

3. (a) aka (HH) - hand
   (e) àla (LH) - welcome
   (f) égō (HS) – currency
   (g) àjà (LL) - sacrifice

The other school of thought recommends that the acute accent should be used to mark the high and down stepped tone on two conditions: where there is a succession of two acute accent marks, then the first is a high tone whereas the second is a down stepped tone. Furthermore, the low tone should be marked with a grave accent mark. In this convention, when there is a succession of similar tone, only the first tone should be marked, e.g.

4. (a) áka (HH) - hand
   (h) àlá (LH) - welcome
   (i) égó (HS) - currency
   (j) àja (LL) - sacrifice

None of them could be argued to be better than the other. Without experience in the conventions, the reading speed is reduced rather than accelerated; the reader, rather than read on, pauses to calculate whether his reading matches the tone marking. Lexicography could be a source of unifying these differences.

The biggest problem of Igbo orthography is how to render technical and scientific terms. Scientific and technical terms are concepts, which are, most of the time, expressed descriptively. Right from the hay days of SPILC to the contemporary times, there has not been any consensus on this. The controversy has merged with a more recent controversy, which revolves around how to write two consecutive or juxtaposed nouns. Much has been written on this (see Uba-Mgbemena (2010) contra Mbah, 2004, 2014, 2021). The summary is that one of the schools of

thought *the concatenationists*, believes that nouns should be compounded if so doing creates a concept or syntagm in the English worldview. The opposing school of thought, *the juxtaposionists*, argues that the concept to be considered should be in the Igbo worldview but not in the English worldview. This school of thought backs its argument with the theory of cultural relativity. It does not believe in nominal compounds in Igbo. It argues that the so-called nominal compounds are sequences of nouns and nominal adjectives, which do not create any new concepts in the language but does so when translated dynamically to English.

What the paper needs to point out here is that in the era of computational linguistics, it is difficult for computing experts to design rules to be observed by the computer system. For instance, SPILC recommends writing 'ọsọ ọsọ' and 'nwa ewu' as two words but 'ngwongwo' and 'nwaakwụkwọ' as one word. These sets of word have the same paradigm and must be written the same way if they must be read in computational algorithms. The implication is that all the words to be compounded and written separately must be listed in the lexicon. No language operates on finite state grammatical rules but on finite rules that generate an infinite number of grammatical structures.

The lexicography connection

Lexicography is the art and craft of making dictionaries (Landau, 2001, Crystal, 1980). Landau (2001) defines the dictionary as the text that describes the meanings of words, often illustrating how they are used in context. She claims that dictionary definitions are confined to information, which leads the reader to understand an unfamiliar word. A dictionary is therefore a repository of the elements that comprise a language. It contains information about spelling, syllabification, tone, pronunciation, etymology, synonym, antonym, grammatical category and exemplification.

In view of the orthographical inconsistencies observable in the Igbo alphabet and grammatical rule, which is by no means peculiar to the language, it is critical to discuss how the art of lexicography may help in unifying the inconsistencies and hold the controversies on the orthography at bay. One general recommendation here is one: the use of transcription.

Transcription

Generally, transcription is the process of converting or reducing a non-written to a written form. In linguistic science however, it is the act of reducing a spoken form of language into a phonetic or phonological form. In the phonetic form, the exercise reduces the text into how the oral form was produced without recourse to the standard variety or minimal phonological forms resulting from free variations, allomorphic variation or allophonic variations. In oral literary discourses, in texts aiming at exactitude, this form of transcription is the best. However, phonetic transcription lends itself to superfluities and redundancies such that the texts tend towards informality. Lexicography does not therefore rely on phonetic transcription. It recommends phonemic transcription, where the formal properties of the speech are elicited and the elements that do not contribute to meaning are eliminated. Allo-forms are therefore removed from phonemic transcription. Phonetic and phonemic transcriptions are called broad and narrow transcriptions respectively. Let us look at the following examples:

Okafor, Okafọ Okoafọ /okoafɔ/

Orba, Oba, Ọba /ɔba/

Orsu, Osu, Ọsụ /ɔsʊ/

Mbajiorgu, Mbajiogu, Mbajiọgụ /ŋbadʒiɔgʊ/

Ozor, Ozo, Ozoh, Ọzọ /ɔzɔ/

Aloh, Alo, Alor, Alọ /alɔ/

Mbah, Mbar, Mba, Ṅba /ŋba/

Odoh, Odo /odo/

Oduah, Odua, Ordua /ɔd^{w}a/

Chidimma, Chidinma /ʧĭdɪŋma/

Awka, Oka, Orka Ọka /ɔka/

Awgu, Ogu, Orgu, Ọgụ /ɔgʊ/

Ihitte, Ihite, Ihhite, /ihite/

Nsukka, Nsuka, Nssuka, Nsụka /ŋsʊka/

Awlaw, Orlo, Olo, Ọlọ /ɔlɔ/

Asaba, Ahaba, Atsaba, Achaba /aɦaba/

Umuahia, Omaahia, Omasha /ɔmaaʃa/

Onitsha, Onicha, Ọnịcha, Osha /ɔnɪʧa/

Awkunanaw, Orkunano, Ọkụnanọ, Ọkụnaanọ /ɔkʊnaanɔ/

In the above in-exhaustive examples, it is shown that no matter the way different persons may wish to write certain terms, an accurate transcription unifies the whole and leads the reader aright as to the correct pronunciation and meaning of the terms. Furthermore, in lexicography, the tones of all syllables are fully marked such that no one is left in doubt as to the tone pattern of either syllable or word; this may be achieved with the use of either of tone marking conventions

provided that the conventions are accurately applied. It is however noteworthy that no language speaker produces his speech word after word. He produces his speech in consecutive utterances such that the rapidity of so doing makes phonological processes of assimilation, elision, reduction and elaboration of sounds unavoidable. It is therefore the case that in transcribing textual materials, phonetic transcription is unavoidable. This may appear as illustrating sentential structures in lexicographic texts. In essence, phonemic transcription though predominantly the case in lexicography may be supported with phonetic transcription.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to discuss the importance of lexicography in unifying the varying orthographic forms. It reviewed extant literature, which appears to show that no language is without orthographic inconsistencies. These inconsistencies may result from the origin of the orthography, disagreement among language experts, linguistic loyalty and political allegiance and fear of domination. However, no matter the ways the words or forms of a language may be written, once reduced to transcription, the differences will be reconciled. The paper recommends that all dictionaries must have transcription to overcome orthographic inconsistencies.

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