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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORTHOGRAPHY IN THREE NIGERIAN LANGUAGES: YORUBA, IGBO AND HAUSA

By

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the early study of Nigerian languages is closely connected with that of the christian missions in Nigeria. The greater part of this early study was carried out by Missionaries from Europe, who studied the major local languages primarily in order to translate religious material into these 'native' languages, particularly the christian scriptures.

Today, literature is replete with so many researches carried out on the Nigerian languages. However, one thing that may be missing, is that, a majority of these studies have failed to put into perspectives the various stages involved in the early stages of the development of orthography in Nigerian languages (especially, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa). Essentially then, this paper presents a lucid and logical analysis of the various stages in the development of orthography in the aforementioned languages. It is anticipated that the analysis in this paper will provided a detailed and perhaps, a clearer picture of the development of orthography in Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

Hair (1967) states that the study of Nigerian languages since 1800 has had four main results.

- (i) The outside world has been shown that these languages, like all other human languages, are comprehensive and expressive, while their structures are regular and subtle.
- ii Comparison of the languages each to each, and with outside languages each has thrown much light on their history, and hence on the history of the peoples who today speak them.
- iii The languages have been put into writing (or in a few cases, given more efficient orthographies), and have acquired written literatures, most of them very brief but a few fairly extensive.
- iv Publication of studies of the languages has enabled persons who do not speak a particular language as their mother tongue to gain a knowledge of that language more easily than otherwise, occasionally for academic purposes but more often in order to speak the language, and to prepare written material in it, more correctly.

From the 1840s, important work on the

Efik (Ibibio) language was carried out by the Scottish Presbyterian Mission at Calabar. Later in the century, useful material in Yoruba and Ibo was prepared by the Methodist and Roman Catholic missions. The earliest, most thorough, most extensive, and most effective linguistic research was that, covering a dozen languages, undertaken by agents of the Church Missionary Society, a society founded and supported by Evangelical members of the established church of England.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY

The earliest collection of Yoruba words in print dates back to 1819, Bowdich an English diplomatic agent collected the words in Ashanti and printed them in the account of his mission. The vocabulary consists only of the numerals. After the Bowdich numerals of 1819 which introduced linguists to the language, the next vocabularies of Yoruba to appear in print were collected by one Mrs. Kilham and published in 1828. She was known as the pioneer of Yoruba Orthography. Most of the studies started in Freetown to enable them to educate the freed slaves known as Aku.

Hannah Kilham (Hair, 1967) gave some guiding principles for the writing of Yoruba Language as follows:

- a) The recognition of only the significant sounds in a word i.e. the use of only the letters that are heard.
- b) The adoption of Roman alphabet.

- c) The use of one sound for one letter and the rejection of the letters c, q, x, y, w.
- d) The use of double consonants e.g. "enni" (one) "edji" (two).

Her work influence other scholars like J. Raban, Henry Townsend, Crollmer C.A. and Bishop Ajayi Crowther. According to J. Raban many of the missionaries in Sierra Leone had interest in the study of Yoruba language because "... the people who speak it are thought to be superior in intellect to most of the other tribes located in Sierra Leone" (Hair, 1967).

By 1858, Crowther and his colleagues were fully established at Abeokuta where Yoruba studies were centred. Passages in the Bible especially the new testament were translated into Yoruba. Crowther pointed out the usefulness of tones in Yoruba language.

The use of diacritical form for distinguishing tones, the employment of consonants kp, bh, ng, hr to indicate sounds not heard in European languages generated controversy at the initial stage. In 1854, Lepsius, C.R. the German Egyptologist and Philologist published a standard alphabet for all the languages of the world. This was approved by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) Committee and Crowther had to revise them and modify his 1843 orthography (Hair, 1967).

Although Crowther modified his translation, he asserted that Yoruba was not to be reformed to suit the body of foreign linguists, phoneticians, ethnographers and even

printers. He further said that the Yoruba language is unique, independent of all the other languages and it is written the way it is pronounced.

THE YORUBA CONFERENCE OF 1875

An interdenominational minilinguistic conference was held at the C.M.S., Faji Mission House, Lagos between 28th and 29th January, 1875. At the conference it was resolved that:

- i) the use of dots should cease and in its place short vertical lines e.g. o, e, s and not o, e, s as well as 'gh' and 'p' should be retained.
- ii) the use of 'O' and 'n' should be specific to the words e.g. 'igon' (corner) should be written 'igun' but 'obiron' (the sick) should be retained.

On accent, the elevated (acute) tones and depressed ones on monosyllabic words should be marked. But when the word is polysyllabic having all sounds depressed then only the first syllable should be marked (Egbe Akomolede Ile Nigeria, 1977).

THE YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY OF 1966

In 1966 another committee was set up to resolve the inconsistencies of the 1875 committee. The committee agreed that institutionalised spellings were not to be changed. However, some recommendations were made which include the following:

- a) That the spelling 'ai' 'ei' before y be retained.
- b) The two spellings 'obirin' and 'obirin' be

accepted as alternative; and

- c) nw, ny be accepted conversion and should over-rule linguistic principles (Egbe Akomolede Ile Nigeria, 1977).

THE YORUBA ORTHOGRAPHY COMMITTEE OF 1974

It was the Yoruba Orthography committee of 1974 that gave birth to the modern Yoruba Orthography which is now being used by students, teachers and Yoruba writers. At the conference, it was agreed that:

A. Spelling of Vowels

- 1) Words like 'aiya' 'eiye' should not be written since tone render it useless.
- 2) 'on' 'an' should be retained and used appropriately.
- 3) Nasality should be retained in the third person singular pronounce object e.g. 'fun un' nor 'funci'.
Lengthened nasal should be represented by cuplication, e.g. "gan-an" (exactly).
- 4) The diacritic marks indicating open vowels should be a vertical bar (tail) or dot but not a bar e.g. ose/ose (soap) not ose.

B. Spelling Consonants

- 5) That the spelling of double consonants and sh in names be discontinued e.g. Otta, Oshogbo should be 'Ota', 'Osogbo'.

C. Use of Tones

- 6) That the tide (~) be discontinued and replaced by: double vowel and that all tones should be indicated on these vowels e.g. "Orun" should be written oorun (sleep) oorun (sun) oorun (odour)

The tide only indicates that the O is long it does not show the tone or the meaning.

D. Word Division

- 7) That except in poetry, vowel lengthening between words should not be indicated 'omo mi' not 'omoo mi' (my child).
- 8) That the following words should be written as single words "nibo", "nilati".
- 9) That the following items should not be written as single words.
 "ewo ni" (which one)
 "bi o tile je pee" (even though)
 "nigba gbogbo" (every time).

The Development of Igbo Orthography

The studies of igbo language started in Sierra Leone by the missionaries who wanted to evangelize the Africans. In order to be closer to the people they decided to learn the language of the natives which were yet to be written. J.F. Schon decided to learn the Igbo language which he later abandoned in favour of Hausa after he had learnt a few prayers and 1,600 words in Igbo language. He published a grammar of Igbo language which consisted of his glossaries and a few prayers.

In 1848, Clark a Baptist Missionary in collaboration with Merrick an Afro-American published a second collection of Igbo vocabulary. This was followed by Koelles Polyglotta of 1854 with three hundred (300) Igbo words given in different dialects. The Igbo language has many dialects. This the early writers did not find funny as it often gave them a lot of difficulty in writing the language. According to Emenyonu (1978) this "created much difficulty in the world of linguistics and was later to result in controversies over orthography which greatly hampered the growth of an Igbo written language and Literature".

Rev. Ajayi Crowther in 1857 published a Prime that included a translation of first chapters of the Gospel and Igbo alphabet, Igbo words, the ten (10) commandments and the Lord's prayer. He thereby introduced reading and writing to the Igbos and remained the Igbo major textbook for several decades. In 1882 he produced a vocabulary of the Igbo language.

The government anthropologist Northcole Thomas in 1913 published an English - Igbo - English dictionary, while Archdeacon Dennis undertook the translation of the Bible into Igbo. In 1933 the first Igbo fiction 'Omenuko' was published by Pita Nwana.

Written Igbo has made great advances since its earliest representation in the autobiography of Olauda Equiano in the late eighteenth century. The nineteenth century saw more written Igbo in the work of

European and recaptive Igbo Missionaries who came from Sierra-Leone and produced simple word lists and grammars. The beginning of this century provided us with the stories, proverbs and reports in Igbo by English anthropologists and Administrators like Northcole Thomas, W.W.D. Jeffreys, Margret Green, C.T. Basden and others. The translations of the Bible gave a great boost to literacy in Igbo.

The Society for Promoting Igbo Language (SPILC)

For a long time the society for promoting Igbo language and culture was faced with the problem of Igbo standardization and the evolution of standard Igbo. In the SPILC August seminar of 1974, a standardization committee was set up. Membership of these committee includes lecturers of Igbo in the various Institutions of higher learning, authors, publishers, broadcasters, teachers of Igbo in the secondary schools and teacher training institutions, and representatives of the Ministries of Education and Information, State Schools Management Boards, and the mass media.

The standard Igbo emphasises the use of diacritic marks under some vowels to distinguish between open and closed sounds as against the use of the phonetic symbols, and with regard to the bar or dot over instead of the phonetic symbol for the ng sound.

Most writers of government notices, fiction, and radio news use standard Igbo, and the new joint Catholic/Protestant Bible has been translated into it (Standard Igbo).

The Development of Hausa Orthography

The Hausa states and the Kingdom of Borno were the major political units in the central part of the Sudanic Zone of Africa (Hair, 1967). Around 1500, the district was visited by North African Youth, who described it in the account of Africa he wrote in later life, when a captive in Italy. This account was almost immediately published in several European languages, under the author's adopted name of Africans and it gave Europeans their earliest knowledge of the Central Sudan. In the Central Sudan, Borno had its own language, while the other states used the language of Bubi (i.e. Hausa) Leo Africans description as the only information the Europeans know about Hausa for nearly three centuries (Hair, 1967).

The Nigeria expedition of 1814-1842 marked the end of the groping discovery of Hausa. The expedition reached areas where Hausa as a commercial lingua franca. J.F. Schon a C.M.S. missionary in Sierra-Leone decided to study Hausa. Though Schon had no opportunity of studying Hausa in its homeland, he was able to translate three gospels and the Acts of Apostles into Hausa language. He also collected materials for a Grammar and Dictionary. Schon's work was not put into use immediately because it was not of immediate direct evangelistic value to C.M.S. It was thirty years later that direct contact was made with the homelands of the language (Hair, 1967).

His initial works were regarded as incomplete and inaccurate nevertheless he was advised to discuss Orthography with Venn, Koelle and others.

In 1849, a new trans-saharan expedition set off, under the direction of James Richardson. Richardson died in 1851 and the linguistic materials he collected were sent to England. Two works based on these materials were published in 1853. Dr. Henrich Birth took over from Richardson. He went back to England with two Hausa boys who later worked with Schon in his Hausa studies in England (Hair, 1967).

The Magana Housa or Hausa literature written by Schon was published in 1886. He also translated some of the gospels into Hausa language. The following are some of his works:

a) Labari nagari (ko linzila na yahaya) The gospel of St. John.

b) Labari nagari kamada marku/ya rubutasi (The gospel according to St. Mark)

c) Letafi na alwasi-sabo/na ubangi zimu isa kristu (The new testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

d) Letafi na yasaya annabi/da magana/ Hausa. (The book of Isaiah /Translated into Hausa).

In 1896 and 1897, Robinson produced a dictionary and a grammar of Hausa which were largely based on Schon's work. The dictionaries made Hausa language simpler and more useful to learners (Hair, 1967).

Comparison of the Three Orthographies

The studies of the three language started in Sierra-Leone by the European missionaries in order to evangelize the natives. The Bible was their focus. Orthography follows conventions of agreed rules for spelling, whereas phonetic writing follows the sound directly. Orthography uses only the ordinary symbols which are accepted for the particular language which is being written. These may be ordinary letters of the Latin alphabet (as in English), letters with diacritics or additional marks (as in French e, German o, or Igbo o) or special symbols (as in Hausa or Kanuri).

The three languages will be compared under the following headings :

- (i) Vowels
- (ii) Diphthongs
- (iii) Nasal
- (iv) Tone

Vowels

Hausa language is an example of five-vowel languages. Other examples of languages with five vowels in Nigeria are Nupe and Gwari.

Phonetic (i) (e) (a) (o) (u)

Orthographic: i e a o u

The Yoruba language has seven vowels. It has

() and () in addition to the basic five.

Phonetic: (i) (e) (E) (α) (⊃) (o) (u)

Orthographic :

diacritics: i e e o o u

The Igbo language has eight vowels. It has (I) (✓) and (⊃) in addition to the basic five.

Phonetic: (i) (I) (e) (α) (⊃) (o) (✓) (u)

Orthographic:

diacritics: i i e e o o u u

The writing of long vowels

Some languages use the difference between long and short vowel to make a difference between words. For example in Hausa there is a difference between; K sa 'arrange in small heaps' (K sa) and K sa 'fall short' (rig :) or or rigα 'precede' (rigα:) and riigα 'gown' (rigα:).

The cardinal vowel chart below shows the positions of the different vowels (Kay Willison, pp. 5, 7).

Most of the vowels in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are similar. The "i" in the three languages is a high-front vowel while "a" is a front-low vowel. Vowel assimilation is regular in Igbo and Yoruba.

Diphthongs

The three languages Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba make use of diphthongs. Yoruba language has a major diphthong 'ai' to show negative or opposite e.g. ailomo (not having a child). This diphthong is mostly used as prefix. The other one is 'io' only found in 'sio' (showing contempt).

The Hausa language has 'ai' and 'an' as diphthongs. 'ai' is commonly used in the three languages.

Nasals:

Nasal Sounds

Igbo - n nw, ny

Yoruba - in, on, un, en, n m.

Hausa - n.

Some Nigerian languages have nasal sounds which form a syllable by themselves. They are called syllabic nasals because they bear a tone just as 'if they were vowels'.

In languages which have syllabic nasals, they are usually written with m. before labial sounds and (usually) labial velar sounds; before other sounds they are usually written n. The only possible confusion (ambiguity) this can cause is in languages which already use diagraphs beginning with a nasal. For example, in Igbo there are diagraphs nw and ny, as in "inwe" 'to have' and "inye" 'to give', and there is also the possibility of having a combination of a syllabic nasal and a w or y.

The standardization committee

recommends writing the Igbo combinations of syllabic nasal plus w or y with m instead of n for clarity:

Mwepu (subtraction)
myo (a sieve)

In some cases syllabic nasals are found at the end of words, or as the only word. In such cases they are not, of course, followed by a consonant. The syllabic nasal in such cases always appears to be m. Examples from Igbo:

Ana m eje 'I am going'
gbamgbam (tin, corrugated iron)

The Yoruba language has four major nasal sounds 'an' 'on' 'un' and 'en' for examples:

'an' (iyan - pounded yam)
'en' (iyen - that)
'en' (henhen - no)

In Yoruba m and n are also nasal especially when they start words.

Consonants

Phonetic : (b) (h) (6) (t) (d) (dz) (d) (f) (g) (gb) (gw) (y)

Orthographic:

Hausa: b 6 c d f² g
Igbo: b bg ch d f g gw gh
Yoruba: b d f g gb

Phonetic: (h) (dz) (k) (x) (kp) (kw) (k') (l) (m) (m^b) (n)

Orthographic:

Hausa: h j k l m n
Igbo: h j k kw l m n

Yoruba: h j k p l m n

Phonetic: (t) (ts) (s') (v) (v) (u) (w) (j) (z)

Orthographic:

Hausa: t ts w y z y
Igbo: t v² w y z
Yoruba: t w y

Table A: Consonants (Adapted from a chart designed by Elugbo, 1990).

Tones

All Nigerian languages, except Fulfulde, are tone languages. We have high tone (), low tone () and mid tone (-). Some languages also have gliadin tones, that is tones which glide from one pitch to another. For example, in Hausa there is a tone which glides from high to low; we call it a falling tone and mark it with (^):

Examples of falling tone in Hausa:

CONCLUSION

The following observations could be made concerning the three languages from the analysis done in this paper. While Yoruba and Igbo languages belong to the Kwa language group, the Hausa language could be grouped with the Hamitic. Obviously then, a lot of similarities are found in Yoruba and Igbo languages. Specifically, while the Yoruba and Igbo nouns starts with a vowel or nasal prefix, nouns in Hausa language start with consonant. It may also be

asserted that while Hausa and Yoruba have agreed on the standard orthography the Igbos are then to agree on a standard Igbo Orthography. Consequently, while the modern Igbo is the spoken form the central Igbo is the written form. The controversy still rages on as to which Igbo "Central or Modern" should be regarded as the standard Igbo. Meditating on this problem of Igbo language Emenaya (1975) asked what the Igbo should do. Are they to continue with the use of Central Igbo in the present form with all its stiffness or dullness and little chance for growth? or use Modern Igbo with all its virility, elasticity and dynamic potential for growth? or use a relaxed form of central Igbo to accommodate Modern Igbo to be called new central or standard Igbo.

The final observation is that both the Igbo Language and Yoruba language have several dialects. One may then finally recommend here, that the society for promoting Igbo language should borrow a leaf from the Yoruba studies Association of Nigeria who were able to model the standard Yoruba after the Oyo dialect disregarding all the other dialects of Yoruba (Ijebu, Egba, Ekiti, Ilaje, Ikale etc.)

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