Corpus Planning in Igbo: The Imperative of Revisiting the Ọnwụ Orthography

Chris Uchenna Agbedo, Ph.D
Department of Linguistics Igbo & Nigerian Languages/ Institute of African Studies
University of Nigeria Nsukka Nigeria
info@linguisticsafrikana.com ; christopher.agbedo@unn.edu.ng
URL: http://linguisticsafrikana.com
+2348036868498

Abstract

This paper addresses the obvious inadequacies of the Roman alphabet-based Ọnwụ Orthography for writing Igbo, a language spoken in southeast Nigeria. In the pioneering study of Igbo Language, the 1882-1961 period witnessed an avalanche of education ordinances, conferences and related activities, which bordered mainly on orthographic reforms intended to fashion out the most convenient way of reducing Igbo to writing. The current Igbo Orthography (Ọnwụ Orthography, I961), which derived from these orthographic reforms, has been in use since 1962. In spite of its seeming general acceptance among Igbo scholars in particular and Ndigbo in general, the Ọnwụ Orthography appears too bogged down by its obvious discrepancies and shortcomings to come to terms with the three canons of modern linguistic analysis, that is, objectivity, adequacy, and economy. In specific terms, the 36-letter Orthography has fallen short of providing orthographic symbols for a good number of vocalic and consonantal phonemes of Igbo. This fundamental lapse runs counter to the minimum requirement of descriptivism, which modern linguistic analysis appeals to. In this paper, we examine the obvious inadequacies of the current Orthography and explore the possibility of extending the suffocating frontiers of the 36-letter alphabet to accommodate discernible phonemes of Igbo, which are currently yearning for orthographic representations. The paper equally draws attention to the festering confusion that characterizes current Igbo spelling conventions and stresses the need for scholars of Igbo studies to articulate a unified set of spelling rules that would enjoy the support and strict adherence of all scholars and lovers of Igbo language.

Background

In his opening address at the Meeting of Igbo Language and Culture Standardization Committee, which held at the Phoenix Hotel, Onitsha between 21st and 22nd March, 1975, the then National Chairman of the Society For Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC), Maazị F.C. Ọgbalụ, inter alia, made the following comments:

> The present Igbo official orthography popularly referred to as the Ọnwụ orthography is not perfect. It is not in any way near perfect. Even if there were only a single Igbo dialect, the orthography could not have adequately provided for personal differences in pronunciation, vowels and consonants, as witnessed even in the same family. The present orthography did not take into cognizance the palatalization, aspiration, and nasalisation that exist in some parts of Igbo land. It is contented with a limited number of vowels

> and consonants into which all other dialects must be accommodated. In other words, it falls short of the linguists' expectations. But languages are for mass communication whether in speech or writing in spite of linguists. Therefore, what appeals to the mass of users of the language will be uppermost in whatever recommendations are made and aimed at during standardization. I should advise that… we should let the sleeping dog lie and not stir up another orthography controversy about which the people are tired…A time may come when it may be become necessary for some aspects of the deficiency in the orthography to be handled…Left for me, I would say that the question of orthography is not right before us. We must first proceed gradually from those areas where agreement could easily be reached to more difficult ones in which opinions may differ.
> Ọgbalụ, (1975) in *Ọkaasụsụ Igbo* p. xii

As if in tacit obedience to this seeming 'Decalogue' received from 'Mount Ọgbalụ', the Standardization Committee stated in its Recommendations (published in Volume 1) "…it was unanimously agreed that the present Ọnwụ Orthography (1961) should remain unchanged." Prior to this, the Chairman of the Committee, E. N. Emenanjọ, had announced in the Background to the Recommendations, "It is a common knowledge that Igbo was blessed with an Official Orthography (also called the Ọnwụ Orthography) in 1961." Emenanjọ (1996) carried this optimism further when he adopted the present Ọnwụ Orthography in a book, whose unspoken aim, he noted "… is that of laying to rest the spectre of controversy and helping to see the issues in Igbo spelling settle down for good. Plucking from the same note of maintaining the status quo, Nwadike (2002:77) acknowledged, "…the present Ọnwụ Orthography is in itself full of discrepancies, but they should be allowed to fossilize…" The reason for this stance is that no orthography is perfect; rather, orthographic discrepancies and dissatisfaction have existed, and still exist in most languages.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that there is a consensus among scholars of Igbo studies about the inadequacies of the Ọnwụ Orthography but the anticipated scathing consequences of any attempt to divest the Orthography of these deficiencies make such move a sacrilege. This is discernible from Nwadike's vow: "It is believed that the Igbo will never engage in such a costly exercise of looking for a perfect alphabet." Even Emenanjọ (1996) admitted that his book, entitled, *Standard Igbo Spelling* should be more appropriately called *Standard Igbo Orthography*. However, given that the word, 'orthography' conjures memories of controversy, conflict, and other bitter disagreement in many uninformed Igbo minds, he settled for the less appropriate but harmless title, which the book now carries. The obvious reluctance of these eminent Igbo scholars to engage in any form of academic exercise that could be considered even in the remotest sense as 'orthographic' is quite understandable. The decision to 'avoid opening up any new wound' (Emenanjọ, 1996:3) and also 'allow the sleeping dog to lie' (Ọgbalụ, 1975) unarguably derived from the need to refrain from stirring up another round of Igbo Orthography controversy and its debilitating effects on the language.

The controversy period (1926-1961) is referred to as a 'blank period in Igbo literary history' given that it limited the development of the literary language and production of literature, following the refusal of many publishers to publish in Igbo.

One point, which rings out clearly from the foregoing is that the present Igbo Orthography is 'full of discrepancies and imperfections' but the fear of possible controversy and its consequences, which an orthographic reform aimed at redressing these obvious inadequacies would generate renders such move quite unthinkable. The questions are:

(i) How long is Igbo as a language going to cope with these inadequacies before they are adequately redressed?

(ii) When will Ndigbo muster up enough courage to cast away the jinx of orthography controversy and embark on deliberate orthographic reforms aimed at redirecting it along the path of obvious linguistic realities of our contemporary times?

(iii) For how long are serious scholars of Igbo studies going to defer to the whims and caprices of the 'many uninformed Igbo minds'?

It is clear that such fundamental questions may not make much meaning to those who appear pathologically allergic to orthography reforms in Igbo language. Nonetheless, we intend to prove in this paper the pertinence of such questions and that the future development of Igbo language is inviolably tied to successful resolutions of these thorny issues.

2. Orthography Reforms: An Overview

2.1. Global Perspective

It has to be stated from the onset that orthography reforms constitute a significant landmark in the historical developments and changes in the languages of the world. Orthographic and spelling reforms constitute an important aspect of corpus language planning, the central objective of which is to provide orthographic representations for all discernible phonemes in the language, and possibly introduce a logical structure connecting the spelling and pronunciation of words for easier spelling. Often times, reforms range from modest attempts to eliminate particular irregularities (such as SRI) through more far-reaching reforms (such as Cut Spelling) to attempts to introduce a full phonemic orthography, like the Shavian alphabet or its revised version, Quikscript, the latest Deva Greek alphabet, the Latinization of Turkish or Hangul in Korea. In English, the impracticality of a simple phoneme-letter representation of the language with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet provided the impetus for most spelling reform proposals, which advocated multi-layered letter graphemes. Also, the 19th century English spelling reforms proposed by Noah Webster was in part concerned with distinguishing American from British usage.

According to *Ozideas*, there have been major or minor reforms in the writing systems of every major language in the world within the past hundred years. These include Afrikaans, Albanian, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Filipino, French, Finnish, German, Greek, Greenlandic, Hebrew, Indonesian, Irish, Italian, Korean, Japanese, Malaysian, Niugini Tok Pisin, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Swedish, Taiwanese Mandarin, Turkish and Vietnamese. In the French Language, a substantial reform ordered by the then Prime Minister changed the spelling of about 2000 words in 1990.

In spite of the heated controversy generated by this sweeping reform, the new recommended orthography received official support in France, Belgium, and Quebec in 2004. Similar reforms in the German language date back to 1901. Although the 1944 reform was hampered by the Second World War imbroglio, there was a major breakthrough in this regard in 1996 when German-speaking countries signed an agreement for spelling reforms, which was planned to be gradually introduced in 1998

and fully used in 2005. The *Rechtschreibreform* has not been without disputations as majority opinion is against the new rules.

In summer of 2004, several newspapers and magazines returned to the old rules. In Greek, the classical, mediaeval and early modern *polytonic* orthography gave up a number of archaisms inherited from Ancient Greek to pave way for a modern *monotonic* orthography. Indonesian language underwent spelling reforms in 1947 and 1972, after which its spelling was more consistent with the form of language spoken in Malay language of Malaysia. In Japanese, the original *kana* syllabaries invented around 800AD underwent some sort of standardization 1900 during which the pronunciation of many words changed in a systematic way from the classical Japanese language as spoken when the *kana* characters were invented. In 1946, a Cabinet Order officially adopted spelling reforms, making the spelling of words purely phonetic and dropping characters that represented sounds no longer used in the language.

Before the Norwegian independence in 1905, the language was written in Danish with minor characteristic regionalisms and idioms. But shortly after independence, there were spelling reforms in 1907, 1917, 1938, 1941, and 1981, reflecting the tug-of-war between the spelling style preferred by traditionalists or reformers depending on social class, urbanization, ideology, education and dialect. The phonetic form of spelling in medieval Portuguese changed to the etymological orthography at the dawn of the Renaissance. The spelling rules of the language experienced a swing back to phonetic principles in the early 20th century, the intentions of which were to eliminate traces of etymological redundancies, reduce the number of words marked with diacritics, and to bring the Brazilian spelling standard and the European-African spelling standard closer to each other.

The Chinese writing system was recorded from about 1700 BC. It was standardized in the 3rd century BC, and remained basically the same as in Confucius' time until the early 20th century. In 1926-28 a national romanised script was adopted for communication with the West, for communications technology, and for scientific vocabularies, which are hard to translate into logographs. A month after achieving power in 1949, the Communists set up a Language Reform committee, as urgent business, as has been a characteristic action of modern revolutionary governments. In 1950 orthographic characters were simplified to accompany further drives for popular literacy, with the aim of unified nation building. In 1951 Chairman Mao promoted *pinyin*, while taking care to maintain Chinese linguistic tradition. More than 1700 schemes for the alphabetization of Chinese were submitted and in 1958 an official pinyin was adopted.

Russian language has also witnessed a number of orthographic reforms, most of which were related with elimination of letters of the *Cyrillic alphabet*. The introduction of Peter I's *civil script* in 1708 marked another significant stage in Russian spelling reforms. The reform that followed shortly after the Revolution simplified the orthography by eliminating four obsolete letters and the archaic use of the letter, *yer* at he end of words. There have been several spelling reforms initiatives in Spanish such as those of Andres Bello, Juan Ramon Jimenez, and Gabriel Marquez, but the urge to retain the RAE standard has so far remained irresistible. Between 1948 and 1980, Danish language has undergone subtle but substantial orthographic reforms such as dropping the capitalization of nouns, the abandonment of the diphthong Aa/aa in favour of the Swedish letter Å/å, and the recognition of W as a full-fledged letter, distinct from the letter V.

The history of Dutch is replete with orthographic reforms. The same applies to the Latvian language, which discarded the diagraph *Uo* in 1914, the letter *Ō* in 1946 and the letter Ŗ and ***C****h* in 1957. The Turkish alphabet replaced the Ottoman Turkish script in the Turkish language. Spelling reforms took place between 1922 and 1924 in Armenian language. In Korean language, the *Hangul* alphabet replaced *hanja* just as the *quô ngũ* script replaced the *chũ nho* and *chũ nôm* systems in Vietnamese language. Again, series of spelling reforms brought to the fore, the significant differences between the standard Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian languages respectively.

The story of each language has been different. For some it has been easy transition, for others long-running battles. For some, it derived from democratic choice while for others, it was outright arbitrary imposition almost overnight. Most writing systems change their form gradually over time, often growing by accretion, like Egyptian and many Indian scripts. However, once a basic principle has been set down, writing conventions must be made clear if communication is to be reliable. The first standardization may be long and late in coming; if it happens to be made today, it may be regarded as a reform. But always, if literacy is not to be restricted to elite, an efficient writing system must be able to respond to needs for change. The histories of writing systems often show developments towards greater efficiency, but also the dead wreckage that accumulates and encumbers them. They show how difficult change can be, but also the benefits and acceptance once it is achieved. All orthographic reform is usually difficult to bring about, however great the need and however profitable the outcome. In some cases, opponents of spelling reforms are characteristically disposed to predicting future failure on the grounds of past failures, but in many countries, improvements have taken years, and even centuries.

2.2. Orthography Reforms in Igbo

In the case of the Igbo language, the orthography journey began with the enactment of the Education Ordinance and Code of 1926 by the British Colonial Government and subsequent establishment of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IIALC). The Institute produced a pamphlet, entitled, *Practical Orthography of African Languages*, which was later to be applied to and adopted wholly or in part for over sixty African languages, including Igbo. This action, as Oraka (1983: 32) noted, "…started a heated controversy that almost suspended Igbo studies for more than thirty years." In a similar comment, Nwadike (2002:62) observed, that the adoption of the orthography "…gave rise to orthographic reforms and their attendant controversies ever known in linguistic circles…" Beginning with the 35-letter 'Africa' orthography of 1929, otherwise known as 'Adams-Ward Orthography', the reform train trudged on, ploughing through the Central Dialect/Union Igbo debacle, the Lepsius-New Orthography tug-of-war between the CMS and proponents of the Africa Script, series of Conferences (Umuahia 1944; Onitsha 1944; Enugu 1944; Aba 1952; Owerri 1953), the Old Ọnwụ Orthography, the 1955 Compromise Orthography before finally anchoring on the 1961 Onwu Orthography.

There are a number of pertinent issues, which characterized the emergence of the Igbo Orthography. First, the Ọnwụ Committee, which mid-wifed the 1961 Orthography was constituted by people, who had no requisite training in language-related issues. Of course, its chairman, Dr. Ọnwụ was a medical doctor. This, perhaps, is not peculiar to Igbo. As Baker (1997:104) observed, "most of the new

orthographies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were designed by missionaries without any relevant training." Second, the Ọnwụ Orthography was a deliberate imposition on Ndigbo by the Government of the day. In a circular issued by the then Ministry of Education, Eastern Nigerian Government, Enugu (Ref. No. IN: 9641/372) dated 25th June 1962, and addressed to all principals of schools, the government, according to Oraka (1983: 40), ordered that all "must use it henceforth in the teaching and studying of the language."

Third, the series of activities that precipitated the emergence of Ọnwụ Orthography bear appreciable imprimaturs of the missionaries, especially as it concerned the critical decision on which dialect(s) of the language to base the orthography. As Baker (99) further observed, the first people to establish a mission in a territory often arrived there without any prior knowledge of the wider linguistic situation into which they had ventured. In their haste to produce religious texts in the local language, they were apt to assume that the variety spoken in the immediate vicinity of the mission was an appropriate one on which to base an orthography. Such was the case among each of the various and geographically dispersed missions in Zimbabwe, and this, according to Chimhundu (1992) "…had, and still have, many unfortunate consequences for efforts to establish a standardized orthography for the language now generally known as Shona." Fourth, the Orthography is out of sync with the second of the seven-point preferences of the orthographic tradition as stipulated by the 1953 UNESCO Report, that is, 'agreement with phonemes of the language.'

The foregoing issues have severally and collectively conspired to rob the Ọnwụ orthography the requisite features that would have predisposed it to meeting the requirements of the three canons of modern linguistic analysis, that is, adequacy, objectivity, and economy.

2.3. Ọnwụ Orthography and Modern Linguistics

Modern linguistics adopts descriptivism as an approach to language study. This represents a kind of paradigm shift from the prescriptive approach, which analyzed language in the light of another language or other languages. In a descriptive approach, the linguistic analysis of the different levels of language takes into account the peculiar nature of a given language. Considered against the backdrop of purely descriptive orientation, which modern linguistics appeals to, the current orthography, that has finally "pacified the polemics of several years," as gleefully announced by Nwadike (76), did little to reflect the linguistic realities of Igbo language. Perhaps, this is not altogether surprising given the bizarre pronouncement of Maazi F.C. Ogbalu about the irrelevance of linguistics and linguists in the serious matter of designing an orthography for Igbo language.

The second orthographic preference of the UNESCO referred to above stresses the need for any given orthography that worth its salt to be in tandem with the phonemes of the language. Where it is not practically possible to ensure a one-to-one correspondence between all discernible phonemes in the language and orthographic symbols, letters, which represent consonantal sounds, should be collapsed in the form of diagraphs and triagraphs to represent phonemes, which were not part of the phonemic inventory of the language, which adapted and adopted the Roman Alphabet. In the case of Igbo, there are a number of phonemes that do not have orthographic representations. Even Ogbalu and Nwadike appreciated the inadequacies

of the orthography in this regard but they chose to paper over such gross imperfections by comforting themselves that 'no orthography is perfect.'

One then begins to wonder how an orthography, which strives to provide orthographic representations for all distinctive sound segments of a given language tantamount to 'looking for a perfect alphabet.' The English language has a 26-letter alphabet but one is not aware of any contrastive sound segment (whether standard or non-standard) that does not have an orthographic representation. What is even more intriguing is Ogbalu's pontifical declaration that 'languages are for mass communication whether in speech or writing in spite of linguists'. Perhaps, one possible explanation of the irrelevance of linguists in Ogbalu's estimation is to suggest that it derived from demonstrable blissful ignorance of the invaluable insights, which Igbo orthography design would have gained from linguistics as a discipline. Fortunately however, Ogbalu's uninformed declaration has lost value in the light of current rising profile of linguists in academic issues bordering on orthography designs.

In his Preface to *Orthographies of Nigerian Languages Manual III*, the editor, Professor Ayo Banjo observed that the volume (comprising Ibibio, Nupe, Idoma, Berom, Kalabari, and Igala Orthographies) contains contributions, which, though provided by linguistic experts, are presented in a way that will be accessible to most educated readers. Yet, this mammon of ignorance, at which threshold a good number of Igbo scholars have surprisingly stooped in reverence for long, has continued to provide lame excuses to postpone indefinitely any discussion on orthographic reforms, until that time 'it may be become necessary for some aspects of the deficiency in the orthography to be handled'. One is not aware of anybody who claims to possess the right abracadabra that could provide epistemological insights into the chemistry of Maazi Ogbalu's mindset to ascertain the correct time frame, which his oracular pronouncement had set for orthography reforms in Igbo. If the Oracle were still around, perhaps, one could still go cap in hand, and implore him to, as the Shakespearean Macbeth asked the witches, 'look into the seed of time' and tell us whether that cosmic time for orthography reforms in Igbo has come.

All the same, our argument in this paper is that Igbo language studies have outgrown the outworn shibboleths of such oracular pronouncements, which derived more from prescriptive sentimentalisms than profound convictions that can be justified intellectually. In our contemporary times, the gale of linguistic realities continually tugging Igbo Language in the face tend to point unwaveringly to the hollowness of the policy of 'letting the sleeping dog lie'. Surely, the sleeping dog cannot sleep permanently. One day, it will wake up. Let us, on our own, wake up this sleeping dog and confront the nagging headache head-on and finally lay to rest this nerve-jangling ghost of 'orthographobia'. There are good linguistic reasons to revisit the Onwu orthography and this is the focus of this paper in the section that follows presently.

3. The Imperatives of Orthography Reforms in Igbo

According to Emenanjo (1996: 4), "an orthography is a document, which contains information about what symbols are used for writing a language as well as of the rules that govern the spelling of various elements… A good orthography should, therefore, provide the alphabet, spelling rules, punctuation marks and the rules governing their use…" He goes further to list the 36 letters of the Igbo alphabet, which he observes

represents the sounds of Standard Igbo fairly adequately. Incidentally, the list did not accommodate a good number of phonemes in Igbo. These include the following:

(i) Voiceless labialized glottal fricative /h^{w}/ and its variant, labialized palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ^{w}/ (whistling fricatives) found in Nsuka dialect clusters as in áhíá /ah^{w}ia/ (market) or voiced alveolar fricative /z/ as in ázà /aʃ^{w}ia/ (sweep).

(ii) Voiced labialized post-alveolar affricate / / found in Ukehe dialect as in ízọ / z / (to struggle/vie for).

(iii)Voiceless labialized post-alveolar affricate /tʃ^{w}/ used in Obimo dialect as in chʊ /tʃ^{w}ʊ/

(iv) Voiced palatalized alveolar roll /r^{j}/ found and used in Nsụka dialect clusters as in íri /ir^{j}i/ (to eat)

(v) Voiced bilabial implosive / / used in Ohafia dialect as in íma ụra /ịma ʊra/ (to slap).

(vi) Cardinal vowel no.2 /e/ (i.e. the first element of the diphthong, /e/ used in the Nsukka dialect clusters as in ɛka /ɛka/

(vii) Aspirated stop /b^{h}/ found in Umuahia dialect clusters as in bé /b^{h}é /

(viii) Nasalized alveolar roll /ř/ also found in Umuahia and Owere dialects as in ra / řa/

(ix) Voiced dental affricate /dz/ used in Ohebe-Dim (Igbo-Etiti) dialect as in ndìdí /ndzidzi/ (insect)

(x) Voiceless bilabial fricative /β/ used in Ukehe dialect as in ófé /oβe/ (soup).

(xi) The schwa sound /□/ commonly found in Nsxka dialect clusters as in such lexical items as ak /ak□/ (kernel), Agg /ag□g□/ (Ukehe personal name).

The list is by no means exhaustive as further investigation into other dialects of Igbo is bound to throw up appreciable number of phonemes, which are yet to be represented orthographically. In fact, according to Eme (2002), four of the ten fricatives that have been so far identified in Adazi Nnukwu dialect do not have orthographic representations as spelt out by the 36-letter Onwu Orthography. As I had argued elsewhere (cf. Agbedo, 2006), the Onwu Orthography whose 36 letters are grossly inadequate for orthographic representation of some contrastive sound segments in Nsuka dialect clusters and some other dialects of Igbo may eventually spell outright death for such 'unfortunate' phonemes (as the word 'Onwu' implies). This, perhaps, is the direct consequence of designing an orthography with the myopic intention of representing only 'the sounds of Standard Igbo fairly adequately'. This is antithetical to established orthographies throughout the world, which make ample provisions for representing all discernible phonemes of their languages, whether standard or non-standard.

The adverse implications of a skewed kind of orthography for Igbo studies can hardly be overemphasized. Generally speaking, it imposes grave constraints on the adequate and objective description of the language and its dialects. For instance, in the strictly technical areas of language variation studies and oral literature, which involve recordings of live speakers and subsequent transcriptions of the texts, researchers are bound to be hamstrung by the non-existence of orthographic symbols for representing certain contrastive sound segments in the dialect under study. Such constraints most often compel researchers to sacrifice the linguistic canons of objectivity and adequacy on the altar of prescriptivism. For instance, Agụgụ is a common personal name in Ukehe, which is originally pronounced as A-g-g and should be written as Agg. However, in deference to the Igbo phonotactic rule, which admits no consonant clusters, the schwa which lacks an orthographic symbol is raised to a full- blown back vowel and subsequently deployed in breaking a sequence of voiced velar stop /g/ as well as blocking consonant-final position, which is another phonotactic heresy in 'standard' Igbo morphology.

Of course, Emenanjo (1996: 32-3) takes us through a list of caveats for Igbo spelling, in which items (iii) and (ix) rule out vowel elision as a dialect-specific feature. Also, in Elugwu Ezike dialect, there are a number of personal names, which feature such phonemes as (/h^w, r^j, ɛ, ə/) that have no orthographic symbols. These include Amu$ʃ^w$ue, Ogər^{j}i, Agbẹdọ, Agə. Currently, these names are rendered, using the nearest letters in the current Igbo orthography thus: Amufie, Ogili, Agbedọ, Agụ. Perhaps, in so doing, the Elugwu Ezike and Ukehe personal names are being 'standardized' or divested of their non-standard features. In essence, these dialects are being written in the light of another dialect otherwise glorified as Standard Igbo, a practice, which runs counter to the basic principles of modern linguistic analysis.

In the light of the foregoing, it becomes necessary to revisit the current Igbo orthography with a view to providing additional letters for these phonemes already identified. In this regard, we could draw on the strategies devised in previous centuries, as the Latin alphabet had been adapted to other European languages. In designing orthographies for previously unwritten languages, the missionaries, as Baker (1996: 101) observed, "…adopted various conventions from their own languages. Incidentally, these conventions were barely adequate for languages with a small phonemic inventory, but most of the languages, which the missionaries encountered contained sounds or contrasts not occurring in their own, thereby forcing them to innovate." By the middle of the nineteenth century, four main types of innovations associated with the missionaries emerged, that is, the use of diagraphs, the use of diacritics, assigning unprecedented values to Roman letters not otherwise required, and the use of punctuation marks in the representation of phonemes.

Of course, it goes without saying that the original designers of the current Igbo orthography adopted these innovative approaches as was the case in the Vietnamese *quōc ngū̃* orthography, (cf. DeFrancis, 1977a: 209). Also, the Lepsius (1855), Crowther's Yoruba orthography, the Bantu, and Samic (Lappish) orthographies manifested these conventions. The Zulu and Xhosa orthographies as well as Meeker orthographies designed for Ottawa and other indigenous North American languages adopted letters derived from assigning unprecedented values to Roman letters not otherwise required in representing such phonemes as dental, lateral, and palatal clicks; velar nasal, affricate and fricative for Zulu/Xhosa and Ottawa languages respectively. Maximum use of punctuation marks was also made to represent glottal stops in the Pacific and African languages, glottalized and/or ejective consonants, and palatalized

consonants. Malton (1985) pointed out the use of non-alphabetical character like the ampersand (&) for an alveolar lateral fricative in Inuktitut. Also, Hebert and Lindley (1985) reported the use of underline bar to distinguish a uvular fricative from a velar fricative in Okanagan language of Canada.

If we accept to adopt these innovations in devising orthographic symbols for these phonemes in Igbo, it would be discovered that there is no limit to which all imaginable phonemes could be adequately represented. There is nothing sacrosanct about the present thirty-six letters so long as they have fallen short of capturing all the discernible contrastive sound segments in appreciable number of Igbo dialects. Interestingly, the Standardization Committee recognized the immense benefits, which the evolving standard Igbo stood to derive from other dialects. In its recommendations in O*kaasusu Igbo* (5), "The committee feels that in the interest of the Standard Igbo that is now evolving, it would be inadvisable to insist on the use of forms from one dialect only…" In fact, Xhosa, the Bantoid language of Southern Africa has more than forty consonant phonemes, double the number of consonant symbols in the Roman alphabet. These orthographic symbols were arrived at through those innovations earlier mentioned, which began with the Romans.

As Baker (100) rightly observed, the precedent for augmenting the Roman alphabet had been set by the Roman themselves. In adapting the Greek alphabet to Latin, the Romans found no use for letters **Θ Ξ Ω π Ψ** but reintroduced **F** and **Q**, which had been dropped, from Greek at an early stage. They equally developed both **Γ** and **Y** into two separate letters, respectively **C** and **G** and **V** and **Y**. Other European languages, in turn, extended the Roman alphabet by use of diacritics, special characters, diagraphs, trigraphs, and even tetragraphs. Comrie (1981: 199) cited a Caucasian language, Kabara as what may be the world's only example of a tetragraph: **kxby** for a voiceless aspirated labialised uvular plosive.

In essence, the frontiers of the 36-letter Igbo orthography can be extended variously by assigning new values to such letters as **q x c**, using diacritics and/or special characters, as well as a sequence of consonants that could result in new diagraphs or trigraphs and even tetragraphs. This option is viable and could be readily exploited for this purpose.

4. The Spelling Confusion in Igbo.

Part of the contemporary issues in Igbo studies, which this paper considers germane to the orthography, is the consistent inconsistencies and the ensuing confusion that have tended to characterize current spelling convention. Emenanjo (1996: 31) recognized this problem early enough when he observed that spelling rules constitute an area of written Igbo where one finds lots of inconsistencies between writers, specialists, printers, publishers, institutions or 'schools'. Recently, I got entangled in this quicksand of 'spelling convention as a fashion' in the course of writing two Igbo novels, entitled, *Ogwu* and *Ozu Nshikọ*, as several Igbo scholars I gave the manuscripts to proof-read returned conflicting 'corrections' especially in the area of the so-called mechanical accuracy. Such areas of disagreement include, ọ bụla / ọbụla, ma ọ bụ / maọbụ, nkea / nke a, ezi na ụlọ / ezinaụlọ, n'ihi / niihi, ugbua / kịta, otu / ofu, nnọọnụ / nnọọ nụ, mụnwakwanụ / mụnwakwa nụ, dịka / dị ka, etc.

One then began to question the intellectual justification of this violent swing from one spelling convention adopted in the *Ọkaasusụ Igbo* to another convention. Item (viii) in the list of caveats for Igbo spelling, as stipulated by Emenanjo (32-3), says, "…No person, society, committee, association, institution or school is free to spell

Igbo the way he, she or it likes. Any such attempt is an infringement of what is called, 'mechanical accuracy', and a disservice to the growth of literary Igbo." Curiously however, Emenanjo (1) had earlier made a mission statement, which tended to run foul of this caveat, when he said, "We set out to write a small and straightforward manual on how Igbo should be correctly spelt…The contents of this book are NOT necessarily drawn from the published or unpublished materials of any meeting, committees, society or project…All I have done is that I have, from looking closely at, and reflecting upon current spelling practices or convention now available in all genres of written Igbo texts, worked out meaningful, viable and quotable formal rules out of these conventions and practices…" It was on this basis that he set out to "…identify, with copious examples, all the spelling rules both explicit and implicit, which are used, and should be used, in writing standard Igbo."

Although Emenanjo's work, which succeeded in putting these spelling rules in more intelligible perspectives should have served as a compromise melting pot for drowning all the 'unpardonable inconsistencies', Igbo scholars, who are pathologically addicted to stirring up spelling controversies would readily latch on to Emenanjo's caveat to pooh-pooh any such deliberate spelling rules meant to streamline Igbo spelling convention and minimize such obvious inconsistencies. The current deviation from 'ọ bụla' to 'ọbụla' is clearly illustrative. One then begins to wonder when this unhealthy dialectical disputation would abate.

Surely, those who seem to derive extra delight from stoking the little combustible wisp of smoke into a roaring conflagration would not entertain any such ''heretical' idea of ending the protracted spelling confusion. It is to such scholars that this paper makes appeal for a cease-fire. Ọgụ *gboo nu*! It is time to come together and resolve these spelling inconsistencies by articulating a set of unified spelling rules for writing Igbo. Emenanjo 1996), in my modest opinion, provides the first realistic step in this direction.

Conclusion

According to Sebba (2007: vii), spelling matters to people. In essence, matters of orthography are of real concern to so many groups, as a reflection of culture, history and social practices, and as a powerful symbol of national or local identity. In America and Britain every day, members of the public write to the media on spelling issues, and take part in spelling contests. In Germany, a reform of the spelling system has provoked a constitutional crisis; in Galicia, a 'war of orthographies' parallels an intense public debate on national identity; on walls, bridges and trains globally, PUNX and ANARKISTS proclaim their identities orthographically. In the case of Igbo, the fine-honed controversies generated by sentimental attachments to orthography reforms are not different. Such has been the sensitive nature of spelling reforms that the language has assumed the reverence and significance of sacred scriptures. Language and orthography are said to be carefully preserved as an essential manifestation of the sanctity of a religion, making its holiness tangible. For instance, the Antique Arabic script is retained untouched for the Qur'an, ancient Hebrew for the Jewish Scriptures, roman script for Catholic Croats and Cyrillic for Orthodox Serbs.

In the same way, the debilitating and retrogressive effects of a protracted orthography controversy on Igbo have tended to confer on it a kind of sanctity, which effectively keeps any form of spelling reforms at bay. However, such assumed sanctity pales into insignificance in the light of the linguistic realities of our

contemporary times. More than ever before, the obvious inadequacies of the present Igbo orthography have made its urgent review an inescapable option. As the Igbo saying goes, *Anaghị ekworo maka mgbagbu ghara ọgụ*. In other words, it makes little sense to abandon the warfront for fear of being killed. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. It is better to wage this war frontally now and finally confine its dire consequences to the obscure ravines of our collective inner recesses than postpone it indefinitely and live permanently with its fleeting moments of nightmarish fears.

Our contention in this paper is that comprehensive orthography reforms in Igbo intended to make up for its fundamental shortcomings and eliminate the confusion arising from spelling inconsistencies would stand the language in a better stead to grapple with the challenges of responding meaningfully and adequately to the linguistic realities of contemporary times.

References

Agbedo, C.U. (2006) 'Enevibeje' Scripts: Some Preliminary Statements. In I. Ikwubuzo, C. Ohiri-Aniche & C. Nnabuihe (eds.) *Udezuligbo: A Festschrift in Honour of Sam Uzochukwu* Lagos: Green Olive Publishers, pp: 282 – 302.

Baker, P. (1997) Developing Ways of Writing Vernaculars: Problems and Solutions in Historical Perspective. In A. Tabouret-Keller, R.B. Le Page, P. Gardner-Chloros, & G. Varro (eds) *Vernacular Literacy: A Re-Evaluation* Oxford: Clarendon Press pp. 93-142

Chimhundu, Herbert (1992) Zimbabwe Standard Shona: Myth and Reality. In N.T. Crawhall (ed) *Democratically Speaking: International Perspectives on Language Planning* South Africa: Salt River pp.77-88

Comrie, B. (1981) *The Languages of the Soviet Union* Cambridge: C.U.P.

Crowther, S.A. (1852) *A Vocabulary and Grammar of the Yoruba Language* London: Longman Group

DeFrancis, John (1977a) *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam* The Hague: Mouton Press

Eme, C.A. (2002) Fricatives in Adazi Nnukwu Dialect of Igbo: The status of /hw/ A Ph.D Seminar paper presented at the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Emenanjo, N. (1996) *Standard Igbo Spelling Nsupe Igbo Izugbe: A Practical Guide* Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages

Herbert, Y. & Lindley, S. (1985) Evaluating an Orthography. In Burnaby, B. (ed) *Promoting Native Writing Systems in Canada* Ontario: Institute for Studies in Education

Lepsius, R. (1855) *Standard Alphabet for Reducing Unwritten Languages and Foreign Graphic Systems to Uniform Orthography in European Letters* London

Malton, S.T. (1985) Six Years Later: The ICI Dual Orthography for Inuktitut- 1976-1982 In. Burnaby, B. (1985), pp. 137-57

Nwadike, I.U. (2002) *Igbo Language in Education: An Historical Study* Obosi: Pacific Publishers

Ogbalu, F.C. (1975) An Opening Address by the Chairman: Igbo Language and Culture Standardization Committee Meeting, Phoenix Hotel, Onitsha 21st & 222nd March, 1975

Okaasusu Igbo (Igbo Metalanguage) *Recommendations of the Igbo Standardization Committee of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture* Nigeria: The Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture

Sebba, M. (2007) *Spelling and Society: The Culture and Politics of Orthography Around the World* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press