

EDO ALPHABETIC IGNORANCE

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It is quite evident that many Edo writers are ignorant of the official Edo Alphabet decades after it was approved. This seeming ignorance necessitates this attempt to highlight and explain the work of the Language Ad hoc Committee that produced the standardized or official alphabet, with the view of bringing awareness to the general public of the committee's useful recommendations, stipulations, and corrections since the early writing system of the Edo language was designed by missionaries who were non-native speakers. Their system was used for more than half of the 20th century. Missionaries were motivated to develop a system by the desire to give their members the ability to read the scriptures in their native language. Because they were not native speakers of the Edo language, it is not surprising that the alphabets they created contained errors. One important error was the use of two letters "r" and "rh" to represent three different sounds in the language, viz. "r," "rh," and "rr." The combination "rr" is a recent addition to fill the vacuum created by its absence in the old orthographies as will be explained below. Incidentally, during this period, several European and American linguists showed interest in the language, contributing remarkably to the development of its alphabet. The most outstanding contributor was Hans Melzian.

Edo writers of this period such as Chief J. U. Egharevba and J. I. Eguvoren used the missionaries' alphabets with their manifold ambiguities. However, the 1970s saw native speakers developing enthusiastic interest in their language's writing system, having found the

Missionaries' orthographies inadequate. Not even Catholic and Anglican missionaries agreed on the same orthography. Individual efforts in this period resulted in confusion that attracted the concern and interest of the generality of the people.

At the forefront of the confusion were some phonetic symbols introduced into the alphabet by Mr. Emwima Ogierraikhi, the lecturer in charge of Èdo Studies in the University of Lagos. The phonetic letters in question were: [x] for letter /kh/; [ɣ] for /gh/; [ɔ] for /o/ and [ɛ] for /e/. His aim, he explained, was to make the language easier for non-Èdo, who complained about the complexity of the *digraph* or double consonants in the alphabets. It was observed, however, that not all the consonant *digraphs* were covered by his innovation. Some people saw the exclusions as inconsistent with his declared motive. Others also questioned the rationale behind his inclusion of certain vowels that were not digraphs in the alphabet. He explained his motivation as a desire to remove the dotted vowels /e/ and /o/, substituting the phonetic symbols [ɛ] and [ɔ] for them respectively in order to make the language easier for an international audience to read. However, his explanation did not convince the agitated stakeholders.

It was at the height of this squabble that the then Military Governor of Midwest Region, Brigadier S. O. Ogbemudia, constituted an Ad hoc Committee of linguists and interested groups to review and design an orthography that would be acceptable to all involved. In its overview of the assignment, the committee identified the following issues, among others, for consideration: (1) what to do with the disputed new, unfamiliar letters; (2) the status of the letter /mw/ which experts considered a subclass or *variant* of the letter /vb/; (3) the need to indicate tone marks as an integral part of the envisaged alphabet, and (4) the adoption of letter /rr/ to fill the vacuum created by its absence from the old orthographies. The committee held several seminars and workshops in Benin City and other places in Nigeria.

At the end of deliberations, the ad hoc committee adopted the following resolutions:

(1) The removal of the newly introduced phonetic symbols. The committee submitted that the letters were unfamiliar and novel to many people. In addition, they expressed the problem of typing the new letters as there were no suitable typewriters at the time. In addition, there was serious criticism on the part of the public that mocked the letters by ascribing English value and pronunciation to them. Those whose names were spelled with letter [x], that is, /kh/ were particularly bitter in opposing the change, contending that the whole exercise was a calculated attempt to destroy the language's existing writing system in the guise of modernism. Others queried why other consonant diagraphs such as /vb/, /mw/, /kp/ and /gb/ were excluded from the change.

(2) The removal of the letter /mw/ from the alphabet was also adopted. As mentioned above, linguists had argued that the letter was a variant of the letter /vb/ and therefore should not find a place in the orthography. The argument was based on the phonological theory which states that only *phonemes* and not *allophones* need to be represented in an orthography. An allophone is a variant of a phoneme, made different from the phoneme by the assimilating power of another sound. In this case, /vb/ changes to /mw/ when it precedes a nasal vowel.

By way of illustration, let us consider /èvbá/ = "there" and /èvbán/ = "here." In /èvbá/, /vb/ precedes an oral vowel /a/ and in /èvbán/, it precedes a nasal vowel /an/. *Acoustically*, the /vb/ preceding nasal vowel /an/ sounds different from the /vb/ preceding oral vowel /a/. The former is seriously nasalized and sounds different because of the assimilating power of the nasal vowel /an/. This *acoustic* change or difference cannot qualify the nasalized /vb/ as a different sound or phoneme. That means that both the oral /vb/ and nasalized /vb/ are variants of the same

phoneme, although pronounced differently because of the assimilating power of the nasal /an/ that makes it a positional or environmental variant of the oral /vb/.

Eventually, however, the removal of letter /mw/ from the alphabet by the ad hoc committee gave rise to another round of argument because the linguistic explanation for its removal did not make sense to many stakeholders, particularly those whose names were spelled with the letter /mw/. The rejection also had serious consequences. The most distressing was the demand for withdrawal from circulation of the books that had been commissioned to be published without the letter /mw/. The books were discarded at a considerable loss to the publishers. Thus, the letter /mw/ continues to be retained in the alphabet to make it acceptable to the opposition, even though the letter has no technical plausibility. This retention also shows the importance or weight of the idea of *acceptability* in designing an orthography in the context of a communal commodity such as a shared language. As a communal property, an orthography must be accepted by all stakeholders in compliance with the principle.

(3) One of the most profound innovations the ad hoc committee made was the adoption of tone marking to indicate lexical differences in the writing system. Tone, as a *suprasegmental*, is a valuable feature in a tone language such as Èdo. Tone is a significant, contrastive, but relative pitch on each syllable to indicate definitive pronunciation of words and difference in meaning. Two *phonemic* tones, High and Low, are utilised in the language. Writing about the new orthography, linguistics scholar Rebecca Agheyisi says:

Also consistent with the stipulation of the official orthography, tone marking has been confined exclusively to those forms which might remain ambiguous without indication of tone.

The tone marks on such forms are expected therefore to be regarded

as part of their regular spelling. In this regard, only two tones are marked namely [ˈ] for high and [ˋ] for low; intermediate or mid tone is left unmarked.¹

As evident from Agheyisi's remark, Edo has many words that have the same *phonological* shape and sound with different meanings because of differences in tone. For this reason, tone is lexical in the language, because the substitution of a low tone for a high one causes a change in meaning. For example, /àdà/ with high tone means a "scepter," but when the tone is low as in /àdà/ the meaning changes to "crossroad." This is what it means to say that tone is lexical in the language. Incidentally, the committee's focus was confined to lexical forms that might cause confusion if tone were not marked, as with the pair of words in the previously mentioned example. Many such pairs exist in the Edo language, and the author is convinced that the committee's decision to confine tone marking to these forms was appropriate as detail-tone marking would be too cumbersome for a regular writing system.

(4) The introduction of letter /rr/ in the orthography was the most valuable change made by the ad hoc committee. Why? For a long time a vacuum had existed in the Edo alphabet when the two letters /r/ and /rh/ were conventionally used to represent three different sounds, viz. /r/, /rh/ and /rr/, in the language. These sounds are technically described as follows:

r is a voiced Alveolar approximant.

rh is a voiceless Alveolar trill.

rr is a voiced Alveolar trill.

What is common to the three sounds is that they are all *alveolar* sounds, meaning that they are produced in the front of the mouth with the tip of the tongue pressing against the teeth ridge.

¹ R. N. Agheyisi, *An Edo-English Dictionary* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1982), xiii-xiv.

Their differences may be explained as follows: /r/ is an *approximant* because it is produced with no audible frictional noise and which is why it is otherwise called a semi vowel sound as in “àrò” (eyes). A *trill* is a sound produced by a *complete closure* of the air-passage followed by a quick, repeated release of the closure resulting in successive tongue tapping movement. The letter /rh/ is the voiceless counterpart of /rr/ because they are both produced in the same manner and place. Although /rh/ is *voiceless*, /rr/ is *voiced*. A sound is voiceless when the *vocal cords* do not vibrate in its production, though they vibrate in a voiced sound. In the language, /rh/ is produced with heavy *aspiration* as in “èrhèn” (fire) and /rr/ is pronounced almost like the English /r/ trill as in “ùrrò” (wooden bowl). The sounds represented by the three letters are significant in the language because the substitution of one for the other results in a change of meaning. Any linguistic sound that has this quality is called a *Phoneme*.

The contrast between these sounds is very clear in words in the following examples.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

r as in **úrò** = line.

rh as in **ùrhò** = door.

rr as in **ùrrò** = wooden grinding bowl.

The three words--/úrò/, /ùrhò/ and /ùrrò/--are supposed to be the same word with the same meaning because of their identical phonological shape and sound. But they are not because of the contrast between the three sounds as represented by letters /r/, /rh/ and /rr/. It is this contrast or difference that results in the differences in their meaning. This explanation also demonstrates why the omission of any one of these letters from the alphabet would create a vacuum in the writing system of the language.

The preceding paragraphs attempt to highlight and explain the work of the ad hoc committee on Èdo language. At the end of its work the committee submitted its recommendations and stipulations to the government. They were approved for use by the Ministry of Education in 1974. However, observation shows that the committee's approved stipulations made over four decades ago are not reflected in the writings of many writers of the language today. They still use the old orthography, and one is completely at sea as to why this is so. Could it be that these innovations have not been made public to the writers? Or have the writers deliberately ignored the innovations, regarding them as mere academic exercise? Whatever the reason, it is sad that four decades after the new alphabet was officially approved for use, the writing of the language is still beset with confusion and ignorance. This is the crux of the matter.

SUMMARY

THE VALUE OF LETTER /MW/: As stated above, the letter /mw/ was retained in the orthography, but writers use it ambiguously in their writings. The letter is not an oral but a nasal consonant. It is one of the three nasal consonants in the language, viz. /m/, /mw/ and /n/. These consonant letters are pure nasals and the vowels they precede are automatically nasalized and do not require /-n/ suffix to make them sound nasal. The following illustrative examples make this clear:

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES: NASAL CONSONANTS

m	mw	n
àmẹ̀ not <i>àmẹ̀n</i> = water	àmwẹ̀ not <i>àmwẹ̀n</i> = wife	ònà not <i>ònà̀n</i> = this
èmẹ̀ not <i>èmẹ̀n</i> = monkey	òmwá not <i>òmwá̀n</i> = person	ènà not <i>ènà̀n</i> = these

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ámà not *ámàn* = sign òmwá not *òmwán* = measure ònì not *ònìn* = cold
òmò not *òmòn* = child èmwè not *èmwèn* = word ùnú not *ùnún* = mouth

The above illustrative examples show that nasal consonants ‘m’, ‘mw’ and ‘n’ do not precede nasal vowels which amounts to double nasalization. So nasal vowels are preceded by oral consonants, as in the following examples:

ORAL CONSONANTS AND NASAL VOWELS

dán = to bounce	fán = to loose	tán = to be tall
kpèn = to harvest	tèn = to relate	wèn = to suck breast
dín = to be brave	fian = to cut	gbín = to blunt
dòn = to be lean	sòn = to grow	tòn = to be hot
kùn = to construct	sùn = to draw	vùon = to be full

The confusion seems to be related to writers’ ignorance of the difference between oral and nasal vowels. There are seven oral vowels, viz. /a e ẹ i o ọ u/ and five nasal vowels, /an ẹn in ọn un/. The nasal vowels are written in the orthography as *digraphs*, that is, two or double letters representing a single letter. Thus, “an,” for example, is a single nasal letter. The difference between the oral and nasal vowels is significant because they contrast with each other. The contrast or difference between them is very clear in the following illustrative example

ILUSTRATION: ORAL contrast with NASAL VOWELS

ORAL VOWEL	NASAL VOWEL
a as in dá = to drink	an as in dán = to bounce
ẹ as in vẹ = to belch	ẹn as in vèn = to wrestle
i as in sí = to crawl	in as in sín = to miss in game

o as in t^o = to live long ɔn as in t^{on} = to be hot
 u as in s^u = to lead un as in s^{un} = to draw

The illustration above shows that when an oral “a” as in “dá” “to drink” is replaced with a nasal “an,” the word changes to “dán” “to bounce.” This change in meaning is caused by the contrast between the oral “a” and nasal “an.” The same explanation goes for all the other pairs in the illustration. This is a vital point in Edo *phonology*, so that we should avoid confusing the two sets of vowel when writing. Writers who are ignorant of nasal vowels should take note.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LETTER /RR/

As stated above, there are three significant sounds in Edo language that are represented with the letters /r/, /rh/ and /rr/. The absence of letter /rr/ in the old orthographies resulted in a vacuum. For example, the words, *ùrhò* (door) and *ùrrò* (wooden bowl) were spelled the same way, as were *èrè* (profit) and *èrré* (proverb). Obviously, this created considerable ambiguity in the language’s writing system. Even in reading, people often ascribed English pronunciation to the Edo approximant /r/. More problematic is the ignorance exhibited by some, particularly members of the younger generation who confuse the approximant /r/ with the frictionless *glottal fricative* sound /h/ by substituting the latter for the former. Many writers who are not aware of letter /rr/ should please also take note.

For emphasis, see the following words derived from each of the three letters /r/, /rh/, and /rr/ to consolidate recognition and understanding.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

/r/

úrò = line; ìrò = thought; èrè = beans; àrò = eyes; òrè outside; òrèrè = hare; /erẹ/ = today;
 erẹrẹ = deceit; oru = cotton; ùrù = jug; Èrè = the second Ogiso; Èrèdiauwà = the 39th Oba.

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/rh/

ùrhò door; èrhá = father; ìrhò cheek; èrhèn fire; èrhú hat; èrhùnrhùn = tail; èrhán = a stick; èrhòn = crawcray; èrhùnmwù = prayer; órhùrhú = berry.

/rr/

ùrrò = a wooden bowl; ìrrò = riddle; èrrè = parable; èrrù = yam barn; èrrá = ganglion; ìrri = a rope; ìrriòrriò = teeth gum.

THE USE OF TONE

As explained above, there are many pairs of words in the language that have the same phonological shape and sound but differ in meaning because of differences in tone. So, the stipulation by the ad hoc committee to mark tone to distinguish such minimal pairs as a part of the spelling system deserves commendation. Regrettably however, nearly all writers of the language appear quite ignorant of tone and its use in the writing system. See the following pairs for more illustration.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

ágbádá	= a flowing robe	àgbàdà	= a double-edged knife
égbò	= variety choral songs	ègbò	= tree felling exercise
èkhàrhà	= an umbrella	èkhàrhà	= a recitation.
èghè	= time	èghè	= small stick for staking yam.
ètè	= a sore or ulcer.	ètè	= a type of monkey
ìbà	= mischief	ìbà	= mud bench
ìghò	= money	ìghò	= animal horn
ódó	= mortar	òdò	= secret

ògò	= bottle	ògò	= palm wine
ùkpò	= year	ùkpò	= road/ bed

These are just a few examples of pairs of words that have the same phonological shape and sound yet differ because of differences in tone. From the above illustration, it is easy to recognize the wisdom of the ad hoc committee in stipulating this innovation in the new orthography, because without tone marks, it is not easy to distinguish between such pairs of words. In conclusion, then, this paper is intended to draw the attention of Èdo writers to the ad hoc committee's recommendations which can make uniformity in the writing system of the language possible if they know and comply with them as highlighted above

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