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ON DEVISING, REFORMING AND HARMONIZING ORTHOGRAPHIES
IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

by

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1. Problems of transcription

The transcription of African languages has been bedevilled by four main problems: inherited systems, introduction of phonetic symbols, influence of European languages, and influence of the printing press.

(a) Inherited systems

The first collectors of language material in African languages were mainly missionaries, explorers and other enthusiasts who had little or no expertise in linguistic description. Confronted with a wide range of puzzling sounds in the languages they encountered, they often resorted to values in English or some other European language of the Roman alphabet. Thus, it was not unusual for a language that has seven vowels to be written with only five letters, a, e, i, o, u representing the vowels, with e representing e and g, and o representing o and ɔ.

Errors and inconsistencies were a hallmark of these early transcriptions. Thus, the palatal onglide between 'a' and 'y' in the Yoruba word aiya 'chest' was recognized and spelt as i, but the identical glide in the word aya 'wife' was not similarly represented. This, of course, results in a certain kind of inconsistency. Sometimes, the inconsistency is more direct as when the same word is spelt differently in the same text. For instance, in Crowther's Vocabulary of the Yoruba language, 1843, the text of the Lord's Prayer contains the word 'kingdom' which is rendered as Ille-obba in one line and Illeh-obbah in another line.

There are, of course, notable exceptions, particularly in the attempts to work out systematic systems of transcription. Among these are the Church Missionary Society's Rules for Reducing Unwritten Languages to Alphabetical Writing in Roman Characters. With Reference Especially to the Languages Spoken in Africa, 1843 (popularly known as Venn's Rules because they were evolved during his tenure of office as Secretary of the Church Missionary Society), the Standard Alphabet, 1854 by Lepsius and Koelle's famous Polyglotta Africana, 1854. To the first of these works, we owe the now widespread system of indicating the sounds [ɔ] [ɛ] and [ɨ] with dotted letters as ɔ̣, ẹ and ṣ; and the last two works further popularized the use of diacritics for indicating vowel quality, tones and nasalization.

However, the net result of the inherited systems is that inadequate spellings have become familiar and sometimes hallowed through being constantly read in bible translations and other religious texts. The task for the transcription of many African languages today has, therefore, inevitably involved orthographic reform. In several cases, this has meant devising entirely new systems, with the consequent reaction and opposition of some interested groups.

(b) Introduction of phonetic symbols

The transcription of African languages in the inherited systems tended to involve the use of the Roman alphabet or such alphabet augmented or modified with diacritics.

The introduction of phonetic symbols, however, constitutes a major departure from the earlier practice and its impact was to have far-reaching effects, particularly in the divergence of transcriptions, the exact opposite of what the phonetic system was intended to achieve. The landmark in the introduction of phonetic symbols was the publication of the International African Institute's Practical Orthography for African Languages 1930, popularly known as the "Africa" alphabet. This publication makes it quite clear that diacritics are to be discouraged:

"For practical purposes in everyday life, diacritic marks constitute a difficulty and a danger. In the first place it is found that in current writing these marks are liable to be altered so as to be unrecognizable and even omitted altogether, as everyone who has had to read written texts in African languages will readily acknowledge..... Letters with diacritic marks give a blurred outline to words and thus impair their legibility. Again, a letter consisting of two, three or four separate elements is much more difficult to grasp and much more likely to strain the eyes than a simple letter" (pp. 4-5).

Hence, new letters are to be introduced where no Roman letters exist to be used for the sounds in question; for example, instead of ɔ̣, ẹ, and ṣ (as in Yoruba) one should write ɔ, ɛ, and s respectively; in Ewe, the retroflex d is to be written d and the velar nasal is to be written ŋ, while the corresponding fricatives are to be written x and γ.

The reaction to the Africa alphabet varied from enthusiastic reception to outright rejection. For instance, it was adopted for Ewe, GE and partly for Akan and Efik, but it was rejected for Yoruba. Ida Ward adopted it for her book, An Introduction to the Yoruba Language, 1952, but was forced to recognize that the ultimate decision on the adoption of the new script for the language rested on the "Yoruba themselves". Her example in this matter was not followed, and the existing Yoruba spelling remained unaltered. With Igbo, the story was less happy. The Africa alphabet was introduced as the New Orthography, but it promptly sparked off a lot of opposition, particularly among native speakers of the

language. Typical of this type of reaction is F.C. Ogbalu's An Investigation of the New Igbo Orthography, 1952, which accused the European sponsors of the script as using it as a means of cutting off the African from "the same orthographic group as the rest of the progressive world" (p. 10). Publishers who had used the new script in their publications found their books unsaleable. In the end, the Government of Eastern Nigeria set up the Onwu Committee to review the orthography and this Committee came out in 1961 with a Revised Orthography (known as the Official Orthography) which abandoned the special phonetic symbols in favour of familiar Roman letters modified with diacritics. For instance, ɔ, ɛ, ɛ̃, e came to be written as o, e, u, i.

One notable outcome of the reaction to the Africa alphabet is that the transcriptions of African languages became more divergent. For instance, languages like Ewe and Ga remained faithful to the script, while others like Yoruba and Igbo retained non-phonetic symbols. The result is that, today, harmonization of the orthographies of these languages and others like them is an infinitely more difficult undertaking.

Certainly in Nigeria, the prescription of the Africa alphabet has been abandoned in favour of diacritics and digraphs. Thus, for vowels, dotting has replaced the use of special symbols, and this has facilitated the representation of harmonizing sets of vowels where only vowels in a given set can co-occur. For example, in Ijo, the dotted vowels i, e, o, u form one harmonizing set, while the undotted ones i, e, a, o form another set. Similarly, special letters used to represent consonants have been replaced by digraphs, e.g. x is spelt kh in Edo (Bini), y is spelt gh in Edo (Bini), Igbo and Tiv, and ŋ is spelt ng in Kanuri, Ijo and Ibire, among other languages. The diacritic for nasalization (-) which is recommended by the Africa alphabet has been largely replaced by an 'n' following a vowel symbol as a convention for nasalization.

Although the teaching of phonetics and the appearance of the International Phonetic Association (I.P.A.) alphabet in 1909 have made phonetic symbols more familiar, those working on practical orthographies now tend to make a distinction between the use of the I.P.A. notation for representing, in as scientific a manner as possible, "minute shades of sound", and the devising of a practical orthography for everyday use, particularly by ordinary users of the language. The transcription for such practical use is a gross one in which minimal distinctions are made and no complicated conventions are employed.

(c) Influence of European languages

Apart from the general influence of European languages in the use of the Roman alphabet, specific influences can be traced in the use of certain symbols such as English sh for ʃ, j for dʒ, and y for j. These do not create any serious problems, for a French reader learns to equate sh with his own ch, and a German reader sh with his own sch. However, more serious problems arise when a convention is adopted which differs from the one in use in general in the orthography. Yoruba provides a good example of this.

The sound [ʃ] in Yoruba is represented by s, but spellings abound, particularly of place and personal names, where the spelling sh persists. Thus, although the word for 'cloth' is written aṣo, there are place names such as Mushin, Oshogbo, and personal names such as Shobowale, Ogunsheye where sh is written instead of s. Similarly, although the sound [ɔ] is spelt o as in ọrọ 'word', the same sound occurs in the place name, Ifaw, where it is spelt aw as in 'jaw'. Here, we see an illustration of how the adoption of English spellings leads to inconsistencies in the orthography.

Sometimes the problem arises from an adoption of conflicting European spellings. For instance, French ou as against English u, particularly in personal and place names. Compare Kokou and Koku as spellings of the same personal name.

(d) Influence of the printing press

As is well known, the printing press is geared to the publication of materials in European languages. One effect of this is that African languages have been printed without due regard to diacritics. Thus e, o, s often turn up as e, o, s thereby causing a confusion with the latter which represent other contrastive sounds.

Reference has been made above to the continued use of the spelling sh. The fact that the printing press uses s for s has tended to encourage the use of sh. A man whose name is Shobowale ('the wizard returns home') sees it printed as Sobowale ('foul the air while returning home'), and is embarrassed because of the funny meaning that the wrong spelling gives rise to. He therefore avoids the problem by using the spelling sh.

Although there are now special printing presses that can handle diacritic marks, most presses still print languages like Yoruba without using any diacritics at all or with very few such marks. Tone marks, for instance, are generally ignored by most printing presses.

The typewriter, because of the ease with which keys may be modified, has been a more suitable means of producing materials in African languages. In fact, some of the best materials in print have been done through litho-offset printing from typewritten material.

The influence of the printing press and the typewriter on the orthography of African languages has been that a decision on what should or should not be accepted as an appropriate symbol has often depended crucially on the extraneous factor of the type. For instance, in the introduction to the International African Institute's Practical Orthography of African Languages, it is stated that in "printing types diacritic marks are apt to break off, and they wear out more quickly than the letter itself, so that more frequent renewals are necessary". The implication of this is that new single letters are to be preferred to letters with diacritics.

The transcription of African languages has suffered from the tyranny of available types and characters. The time has come when such considerations should give way to what is best for the language. If the market for special types is not large, we should make do with adapted typewriters. Furthermore, the government press in each country or state should be encouraged to purchase the appropriate type-fount for printing materials in the languages in that country or state. It is only in this way that the production of literature in the languages concerned can be enhanced.

2. Principles of transcription

In Nigerian Orthography, 1954, Hans Wolff states four principles which a good orthography should conform to. They are accuracy, economy, consistency and similarity.

Accuracy and economy refer to the phonemic principle which Bamgbose in Yoruba Orthography, 1965 states as follows: "a good orthography should represent all and only the significant sounds in the language" (p. 1). This

principle was already in evidence in the designing of the Africa alphabet where it is stated that "the orthography of a given language should be based on the principle of one letter for each phoneme of that language" (p. 17).

The phonemic principle is now widely accepted, but exceptions are often made, for example in the non-indication of tone in most popular texts, the representation of non-phonemic contrasts (for example in the case of the syllabic nasal which is spelt m before b and n before t in several languages), and the use of digraphs for single phonemes (e.g. ny for the palatal nasal [ɲ]).

Consistency relates to the use of "only one symbol for each significant sound" (Bangboṣe Yoruba Orthography, p. 1). The orthography of many languages is inconsistent. In this respect, English is a notorious example, for one single phoneme in English may be represented by several different letters or combinations of letters (e.g. /ei/ in 'date', 'wait', 'day', 'grey', 'eight' and 'break'). Similar but less severe inconsistencies occur in the orthography of African languages. In Yoruba, for instance, the sound ɛ is spelt e in many words such as èyè 'honour' but it is also spelt ei in eiye 'bird'. Inconsistencies also abound in word division, e.g. kansoso or kan soso 'only one', ibiti or ibi ti 'where'. The problem of what to do with such inconsistencies is one of the major problems of spelling reform.

Similarity to other orthographies is self-explanatory as a principle. We live in a contracting world in which contacts with other groups is now a sine qua non. Apart from the general acceptance of the Roman alphabet as a basis for the orthographies of African languages, the choice of one of two suitable symbols may hinge on what happens in the orthography of a contiguous language. Thus the use of dotted vowel letters is now a general convention for writing one of the two sets of harmonizing vowels, and labial-velar plosives are almost universally written as kp, gb. Any new orthographies devised will have to take into account these established forms of representation.

It is assumed that a transcription for an African language will select those letters of the Roman alphabet which have the same values as, for example, in English (i.e. b, d, f, h, k, l, m, s, t, v, w, z, cf. the Africa alphabet). Where the sounds differ, five strategies may be adopted. According to Kay Williamson, Practical Orthography in Nigeria (mimeographed), 1976, these strategies are:

- (i) the use of a special symbol such as β in Hausa, η in Efik or δ in Ewe;
- (ii) the use of a diacritic, e.g. \dot{i} , \dot{u} , in Igbo or \sim in Ewe and Gã;
- (iii) the use of a digraph, e.g. gh, gb, or ny for single phonemes;
- (iv) the use of a Roman letter with an unusual value, e.g. p for Yoruba kp;
- (v) the use of a spelling rule, e.g. n after a vowel to indicate nasalization.

The advantages and disadvantages of each strategy are spelt out by Williamson in terms of ease or difficulty of writing, reading, typing and printing. However, what is more relevant here is that languages select one or more of these strategies and the extent to which they make different selections contributes to the disparity in their transcriptions and consequently creates problems for harmonization.

To take one concrete example, Ewe makes use mainly of the first strategy. Hence, it has non-Romanic symbols such as \dot{d} , f , \dot{v} , x , γ , η , \dot{o} , while Yoruba makes use mainly of the second strategy with symbols such as e , \dot{o} , \dot{s} . It is easy to see why harmonization of the two systems will be difficult to achieve.

Transcriptions actually in use for sounds which the Roman alphabet cannot adequately represent are as follows:

(a) Vowels⁽¹⁾

<u>Phonetic</u>	<u>Orthographic</u>
[\dot{i}]	\dot{i} as in Igbo and Ijo
[\dot{e}]	e, \dot{e} as in Yoruba and Ewe respectively
[\dot{o}]	\dot{o}, \dot{o} as in Yoruba and Ewe respectively
[\dot{a}]	\dot{a}, \dot{a} as in Kanuri and Katab respectively
[\dot{u}]	\dot{u} as in Ijo

The use of diacritic modifications to Roman letters to indicate different vowel qualities is now quite common in Nigeria. However, in Ghana, Togo and Benin, special symbols such as \dot{e} , \dot{o} continue to be preferred.

Nasalization is generally indicated by adding an 'n' after a vowel symbol, e.g. kan for [$\dot{k}\dot{a}$], but for several languages, particularly in Benin, Ghana and Togo, the use of the tilde to mark nasalization (as in $\dot{k}\tilde{a}$) is quite common. One argument that has been advanced in favour of this practice is that there are languages like Bariba, Wama and Yom in Benin which have words ending in closed syllables, with n as the final consonant. Thus in such a case, a spelling 'an' will be ambiguous as between [\dot{a}] and [$\dot{a}n$]. Although one possible solution is to write an for the nasalized vowel and ann for the closed syllable, it may well be that the two methods of indicating nasalization (i.e. with a final -n or with a tilde) may have to be retained, and the choice of one or the other will depend on the language in question. In any case, the dogmatic position of the sponsors of the Africa alphabet to the effect that

"The use hitherto made in certain languages of the letter n to indicate nasalization is not to be recommended, as it undoubtedly leads to misunderstanding" (p. 13)

should now be considered untenable.

(1) [\dot{a}], [\dot{e}], [\dot{o}], [\dot{i}], [\dot{u}] are adequately represented by a, e, o, i, u.

Vowel length is often ignored in the transcription of some languages. Even the Bamako Meeting of Experts on Unification of Alphabets of National Languages (1966) did not come to a general conclusion on the matter for all the languages concerned. The simplest method of indicating vowel length is by doubling. This has the virtue of dispensing with an additional diacritic to indicate length. Compare, for example, the Hausa word for 'horse' written as *dbóki* (with doubling) with the same word written as *dóki* (with a macron used to indicate length). It also agrees with the way consonant length and gemination can be indicated, i.e. by doubling.

(b) Consonants

There are several consonant sounds for which one of the five strategies listed above will have to be applied. The general tendencies in the representation of such sounds are as follows:

- (i) In Nigeria, there is a noticeable preference for digraphs. Hence, spellings such as *ch, kp, gb, ph, bh, sh, zh, hy, kh, gh, rh, rr, ny, ng*.
- (ii) In Benin, Togo and Ghana, particularly for languages such as Fon, Adja, Ewe, and Gã, the preference is generally for special symbols. Hence spellings such as *ḍ, f̣, ṿ, x̣, γ̣, η̣*.
- (iii) Diacritics are sometimes used as in *ḅ* for the voiced bilabial implosive and *ḍ* for the voiced alveolar implosive (as in Ijò), *ṣ* for the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative (as in Yoruba), *ṇ̃* for the palatal nasal (as in Fon).

The range of spellings for the different sounds for which Roman letters and the values usually associated with them are unsuitable can be illustrated by the following:

<u>Phonetic</u>	<u>Orthographic</u>
[ṭ]	<i>ch</i> as in Igbo, Epira and Igala <i>c</i> as in Hausa, Tiv and Nupe <i>ky</i> as in Akan
[ḍ]	<i>j</i> as in Yoruba <i>dj</i> as in Urhobo <i>gy</i> as in Akan
[ḍ]	<i>ḍ</i> as in Ewe
[kp̣]	<i>kp</i> as in Tiv, Nupe, Efik, Fon, Adja <i>p</i> as in Yoruba
[gḅ]	<i>gb</i> as in Yoruba, Tiv, Nupe, Fon, Adja
[ʔ̣]	<i>,</i> as in Hausa, Fula
[ḅ]	<i>b</i> as in Ijò <i>gb</i> as in Igbo
[ḍ]	<i>ḍ</i> as in Ijò

<u>Phonetic</u>	<u>Orthographic</u>
[<u>b</u>] ⁽¹⁾	ɓ as in Hausa, Fula
[<u>d</u>] ⁽²⁾	ɗ as in Hausa, Fula
[<u>k</u>] ⁽³⁾	R as in Hausa
[<u>ɸ</u>]	ph as in Urhobo f as in Ewe
[<u>B</u>]	U as in Ewe
[<u>v</u>]	vb as in Edo (Bini), Urhobo
[<u>s</u>]	sh as in Hausa, Tiv, Igbo, Kanuri s as in Yoruba, Isekiri
[<u>ʒ</u>]	zh as in Izi, Ghotuo j as in Urhobo
[<u>x</u>]	x as in Ewe, Fon, Adja kh as in Edo (Bini), Ghotuo
[<u>ɣ</u>]	ɣ as in Ewe, Adja gh as in Igbo, Tiv, Urhobo
[<u>r</u>]	rh as in Edo (Bini), Urhobo
[<u>ɲ</u>]	ny as in Igbo, Efik, Tiv, Fula, Adja n as in Akan ñ as in Fon
[<u>ŋ</u>]	ŋ as in Ewe, Adja, Efik ng as in Ijo, Kanuri
[<u>ɲm</u>]	nm as in Idoma mw as in Urhobo

It should be pointed out that any of the five strategies outlined above is valid as long as the spelling used can unambiguously indicate the sound concerned. The choice of one rather than the other will be based on the general principles of spelling reform and harmonization which will be taken up later.

(1) Voiced laryngealized bilabial plosive

(2) Voiced laryngealized alveolar plosive

(3) Velar ejective

There is, however, one problem to which attention should be drawn at this point. This concerns the augmentation of the alphabet in order to cope with loan words. The Report of the Bamako Meeting of 1966 suggests that for Kanuri the letters h and p should be introduced for spelling words of Arabic and English origin respectively. For example, pampam from English 'pump'. Although it is valid to provide for integrated loan words, care must be taken to avoid overloading the alphabet simply to be able to cater for a few loan words. Almost all languages of the world have words from other languages introduced into them, but they do not for this reason change their alphabets in order to accommodate unfamiliar sounds. It is even more indefensible to design an orthography with such words in view. Thus in the old Işekiri Primer it was thought that letters like h, v and z should be introduced so as to be able to accommodate such Christian names as Hannah, Victoria, and Zaccheaus. Such words, if they do occur in the language concerned, should be treated as unassimilated loan words.

(c) Tones

For most languages in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin, tone is important because it serves to carry lexical or syntactic distinction. The method of marking tones does not vary very much. When all tones are marked, the symbols used are generally the same, i.e. (´) for high tone, (`) for low tone, (-) for mid tone or downstep, (˘) for a rising tone and (^) for a falling tone.

It is only rarely that all tones are marked, even in scientific texts. Economy is often achieved by leaving the tone that occurs most frequently unmarked. Thus, in Hausa and Igbo, the high tone is unmarked; in Yoruba, the mid tone is unmarked; while in Ijò and Èdo (Bini), the low tone is unmarked.

The real problem with tone-marking is: How much tone-marking should be done? In spite of the fact that in some languages tone bears a high functional load, such is the prejudice against tone-marking that even for such languages, it is felt that the native speaker does not require it, just as the English speaker does not require stress patterns to be indicated in an English text! This analogy is, however, false, and experience has shown that there are many contexts where the word intended cannot be inferred by merely looking at the contiguous words. For such neutral contexts, there is no alternative to indicating tone.

How much tone-marking is done will depend on the functional load of tones in the language concerned; but, in general, one would propose that, for a practical orthography, enough tone-marking should be done to prevent misunderstanding or misreading of words in neutral contexts and to prevent ambiguities.

3. Problems of spelling reform

Whenever an orthography does not conform to the principles of a good orthography outlined above, there are bound to be calls for a reform. A spelling reform is, however, not a simple matter. It almost invariably sparks off some opposition, particularly from authors and publishers.

There are three principles that should guide a spelling reform:

- (1) It "should make as few changes as possible (otherwise no one would accept it)" (Bangbose, Yoruba Orthography, 1965, p. 6). The introduction to the Africa alphabet puts the point as follows: "an alphabet which involves too radical a change from existing alphabets would have little prospect of general acceptance" (p. 6).

- (ii) The proposed changes "must cover, or have implications over, a wide area of the language (otherwise more symbols than necessary will be introduced)" (Bangboṣe Yoruba Orthography, 1965, p. 6).
- (iii) Changes must take due account of "forms of spelling which have long been established" (Africa alphabet, p. 6).

All three principles taken together have the effect of distinguishing a spelling reform from the introduction of an orthography for a language hitherto unwritten. In the latter case, the analyst is free to follow the orthographic principles without much hindrance, but in the former, the practical constraints of what already exists may lead him to depart from the general principles.

There is, however, the question as to how far a spelling reform should be influenced by existing practice. The third principle of spelling reform, otherwise known as the principle of "convention", if interpreted liberally, may lead to a negation of reform. For example, the Yoruba Orthography Committee 1966-1967 in its deliberations decided against changing several obsolete spellings solely on the grounds of convention.

A spelling reform invariably requires the backing of some authority to engineer its acceptance, for without this, authors and publishers may not feel obliged to accept it. One sensitive point at which to enforce a spelling reform is in educational texts. A Ministry of Education may require that textbooks for use in schools must conform to the revised orthography, otherwise they will not be recommended. Publishers who cannot ignore the profit aspect of their ventures cannot but comply with such a directive.

It is inevitable that a spelling reform will involve language experts. Sometimes proposals for such reform are initiated by such experts who also serve on orthography committees. But the limitation of experts must be acknowledged. They cannot force people to accept their proposals; rather they can only persuade them to see the need for the reforms; and even then, they need the backing of an authority that can enforce the reforms.

At this point, it is instructive to use the recent history of orthographic reform in the Yoruba language as an illustration.

In 1965, Bangboṣe's detailed appraisal of Yoruba orthography with proposals for reform appeared in the form of a booklet entitled Yoruba Orthography. Such was the impact of the book and the discussion it generated that the Western Nigeria Ministry of Education set up the Yoruba Orthography Committee in January 1966 to recommend to the Ministry "a Yoruba orthography that will be standard for the whole region". The Committee held twelve meetings and considered thirteen papers in addition to Bangboṣe's book which formed the basis of most of the problems discussed. The recommendations of the Committee were presented to the Ministry in 1967 and published as Report of the Yoruba Orthography Committee, 1969.

The above report gave rise to a number of memoranda and comments which the Ministry felt should be further studied. Accordingly, the original Committee was enlarged in March 1969 and, after holding six meetings, the enlarged Committee reaffirmed all the earlier recommendations of the former Committee, except one which it modified slightly. The recommendations were published as Report of the Enlarged Committee on Yoruba Orthography, 1972 and both reports were then issued together in a single volume.

In spite of these two reports, the Ministry of Education took no action on the recommendations. Meanwhile the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities had in 1971 set up a joint working party whose terms of reference were "to examine the existing orthographies of the main Nigerian languages so as to achieve a practical and functional reform which has a high probability of being welcomed and accepted by schoolteachers of the languages and by authors using the languages". One working party was set up for each of the following languages: Efik, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

In April 1973, the Federal Ministry of Education officially received the two reports referred to earlier and the Report of the Joint Working Party on Yoruba in May 1973. It found that, with one exception, the recommendations in all the reports were identical. It therefore proceeded to refer the recommendations to the Joint Consultative Committee on Education on which all State Ministries of Education are represented for consideration and adoption by all Ministries of Education and the West African Examinations Council (in respect of examinations in the language). In June 1974, the Joint Consultative Committee on Education directed that the recommendations should be so adopted.

It took about eight years from the setting up of the first committee for the recommendations to be accepted, and three technical committees were involved in the deliberations. The delay in adopting the recommendations is even more significant in view of the fact that there was no major disagreement by any of the committees on the initial recommendations. This serves to illustrate the problems involved in implementing a spelling reform, and the need for decisive action on the part of the enforcing agency or authority.

4. Problems of harmonization

Harmonization of orthographies is a sort of spelling reform and, to that extent, all the problems connected with spelling reform are also relevant to harmonization. The main difference between the two is that harmonization necessarily involves more than one language whereas spelling reform may involve just one language or several languages.

Harmonization may be attempted at subnational, national, or international levels. One example of harmonization at a subnational or regional level is the Language Committee appointed by the Midwestern State Government of Nigeria in 1974 with several terms of reference, one of which was "to work out a comprehensive orthography (with reference to existing orthographies) to accommodate the symbols necessary for writing the languages to be taught". This Committee in its report (Report of the Committee on the Languages of the Midwestern State, 1975) recommended a revised orthography for each language bearing in mind the need to harmonize symbols between languages.

Two examples of harmonization at the international level are the Unesco-sponsored Bamako Meeting of 1966 which resulted in the Final Report of 15 September 1966, and the Seminar on the Normalization and Harmonization of the Alphabets of the sub-region of Togo, Niger, Ghana, Upper Volta, Nigeria and Benin (then Dahomey) held at Cotonou in August 1975, under the auspices of the Commission Nationale Dahoméenne pour l'Unesco and the Commission Nationale Dahoméenne de Linguistique.

Harmonization requires a willingness to make compromises, for it may involve abandoning a spelling which has been in use for many years. Harmonization should also take cognizance of the practical question of majority use. For example, it is natural to expect users of Yoruba in Benin to conform to the orthographic practice for Yoruba in Nigeria, rather than the other way round.

The problem of an enforcing authority which was highlighted earlier is even more acute in the case of harmonization, particularly at the international level. Experts are invited to international meetings. They make appropriate recommendations but then it is left to the national authorities to enforce, or not enforce, the recommendations. Sometimes, decisions of the international meetings are at variance with the decisions of national bodies.

Two interesting cases are Hausa and Yoruba. At the Bamako Meeting of 1966, it was recommended that in Hausa:

- (a) vowel length should continue to be indicated by doubling or a macron, the former being slightly preferable;
- (b) diphthongs be indicated as follows [ai] as ay, [au] as aw;
- (c) subject pronouns be written with length and tone indications.

When the Joint Working Party on Hausa met to review the orthography of the language, it specifically rejected all these three recommendations and this rejection was ratified by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education through the Joint Consultative Committee on Education. The position now is that these aspects of the Bamako recommendations are inoperative in Nigeria.

At the Cotonou Seminar on Harmonization in 1975, it was recommended that the following spellings should be adopted for Yoruba to harmonize it with the way Yoruba is written in Benin and the way several languages such as Ewe represent the same sounds:

- (i) ẹ and ọ should be replaced by ɛ and ɔ respectively;
- (ii) ʃ should be replaced by sh;
- (iii) p should be replaced by kp.

The Joint Working Party on Yoruba in Nigeria to which reference has earlier been made had in 1973 specifically recommended the retention of the spellings being questioned and at the time of the Cotonou seminar, the Ministries of Education and the West African Examinations Council were already implementing the recommendations of the Working Party. In fact, one of the recommendations of the Working Party is that survivals of the spelling sh in place names should be abandoned. And the Cotonou seminar would like to extend this particular spelling to all Yoruba words in which the sound occurs!

The lesson to be drawn from the above examples is that international efforts at harmonization of orthographies must be co-ordinated with national efforts. Without the backing of national authorities, international recommendations on harmonization are not likely to be worth very much.

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