

REMEDIAL ENGLISH SPELLING REFORMS I OR CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE CHALLENGES

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Abstract

English, French and all the Nigerian indigenous languages play pertinent roles in our education. Every field of education uses language (o communicate its programmes through the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, each of the skills has obstacles that hinder its effective usage to achieve numeracy and literacy that are in turn the life wire of all educational attainments. The skills have their respective peculiarities. Writing involves the knowledge of visual and vocal symbols of the alphabet. In the present dispensation of the compute]", information technology and the quest for a lingua franca, orthography poses a lot of problems to writing. For the enhancement of our mother tongues and educational system, we have studied English orthography and proposed simplified spelling reforms that can help avert (he English unusual orthographic complications imposed as standards hard and difficult to attain.

Introduction

The writing skill is as important as the listening, speaking and the reading skills for all educational purposes. It entails basic knowledge of the visual symbols and their corresponding vocal symbols. These two elements are characters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent. But for every living language however, listening and speaking are always the first skills to manifest themselves in learners or those that acquire the language. Reading and writing are also important skills that are subsequently learnt formally.

Writing started when the primitive man recorded his ideas through pictures (Ademiluyi, 2003) and this became a kind of code that was studied to be understood. The code passed through successive stages of phonograms and syllabic signs before the symbols finally developed into letters or conventional alphabetic characters. Now, European visual symbols representing signs of the oral language are letters of the alphabet. There are in fact, 26 distinctive letters categorized by sound into two major groups as vowels and consonants. By sign, they are also grouped into majuscule as well as minuscule. Letters are symbolic representations of meaningful sounds used for writing which Gelb (1974:1039), defines as "a device for expressing linguistic elements by means of conventional visible marks". There is however, no physical correspondence or resemblance of the vocal signs and their graphic representations that facilitate their distinction and identification. But the association of a sign and the sound it represents is made by the study of the available significant speech sounds of a language and the earmarked visual signs representing them that have to be conventionally recognized as correct.

All languages of the world including major and minor ones undergo some developmental stages. So, English language too has evolved and undergone several changes. It has had several outside influences. Tobi and Alan (1997:446), reveal that initially, the Germanic people from Northern Europe formed the basis of modern English. Furthermore, the language borrowed words from the Scandinavian language while the Normans from Western France who conquered England in 1066 brought in old French. These two writers further state that later in the 16th century, there was a renewed interest in Greek and Latin and this too ushered in borrowed vocabulary. All these have much positive and negative effect on the language. And now the language has accumulated much vocabulary. Through this accumulation it has become very expressive and is able to cope with the entire expression of contemporary issues. Nigerian languages are yet to attain this level. Some of them have orthographies while others do not have. And because they are neither spoken worldwide nor developed enough, they are regarded as minor languages. Guma (2005:4) laments about the situation of some Nigerian languages that have not undergone any significant growth and says:

Generally, our mother tongues lack adequate vocabulary to a varying degree - of differences. And apart from having no standardized orthographies, an overwhelming majority of our mother tongues have problems of limited

vocabulary especially in relation to technical, mathematical and scientific terms.

But since all languages in the world depend on others for their growth and development, (Guma, 1998:1), English and French continue to influence the vocabulary and sound systems of our mother tongues. After all, African languages too have inflated the English language vocabulary. 'Words like banana, yam, voodoo, jazz, banjo, etc are of various African languages loaned into English (Tobi and Alan, 1997:466).

The external influence has also continued to have negative impact on English. It is on record that English spelling became standardized with the invention of printing and the advent of dictionaries. The reforms require a more serious review because presently, English orthography has been tremendously influenced negatively by several factors that have engendered numerous discrepancies arising from a variety of causes. Factors such as locality, early influences, and social surrounding including individual peculiarities are prominent. These factors have led English spelling to an illogical manner and have subsequently caused inconsistencies between spelling and pronunciation,

Countries like France, Spain and Italy, among others, once encountered orthographic problems and so reformed their spellings and they now have orthographies that are reasonably close to the phonetic ideals. Their cause of good spellings was aided by linguistic reforms initiated by the state or by national learned societies including individuals. Consequently, those who know the basic principles of the languages find their spelling easy and uncomplicated.

In relation to our mother tongues, this paper has analysed English orthography to determine its nature and effect on writing. The paper further states what Nigerian languages can learn from the state and nature of English orthography. Finally, it calls for simplified global spelling reforms in a bid to overcome orthographic challenges to pave way for the educational demands of contemporary Nigeria.

English Orthography

Orthography involves symbols which are individual signs of the conventional writing system that stand for the corresponding elements of any language. According to Jones (2002:11): Sounds are heard. Letters are seen. Letters provide a means of symbolising sounds. If they do so in a logical manner - in other words, if the essential sounds of any particular language or dialect are represented consistently the writing is said to be phonetic.

This act of expressing words by letters must not only be done according to accepted usage but spelling and pronunciation must correspond to a large extent. "Spelling was originally phonetic and still is in many languages" (Nicholson 1981:190). Spelling that corresponds to a large extent to pronunciation is easy for learners and native speakers of any given language. Dialects can constitute orthographic problems as well as the existing variations of an unstandardised language especially where spelling reforms are not made or where they are made but are not accessible to all. In such a case, individual writers write with an inclination to their language variations. But when spelling reforms are adequately exposed to a language community, members find spelling easy and are uniformly consistent in its usage.

An overwhelming majority of Nigerian languages are not developed and have no orthography so cannot be written down. Even those whose orthographies are developed to a considerable level still require much to be done about their suitability for consistent and uniform usage by all.

English orthography is largely non-phonetic and problematic. This is caused by many factors including change in pronunciation, borrowing of words from various languages, the spread of English-speaking communities across the globe and internal language irregularities etc. These have caused much "distortion" to English orthography. Ernest (1952:190) laments over this matter that "the spelling of English is, so far as its relation to the spoken word is concerned, quite crazy". English spelling is now said to be "historically phonetic" (Nicholson, 1981:478) because many words are spelled as they were pronounced some centuries ago. Ernest feels that letters are symbols of sounds and they should determine pronunciation. Tobi and Alan (1997:704) too agree to this and say:

The spelling of English words seems sometimes to defy reason. Some words sound exactly the same even though they are spelled differently (...) and the same sound may be represented by different letters or letter combinations

(...). Conversely, the same letter or letter combinations can represent different sounds.

Phonetic spelling is an effective guide to pronunciation. But where we are not able to consistently associate orthographic features with the corresponding sounds as a result of spelling irregularities, it becomes necessary to overhaul the system for uniformity and ease.

Orthographic Complexities

What is the nature of English orthography? The orthography is encumbered with numerous oddities that have made it irregular, complex and difficult to comprehend. *The Free Encyclopedia* (2007:16) indicates that "throughout the history of the English language, these inconsistencies have gradually increased in number. There are a number of contributing factors". The factors include external influence from foreign languages and the spread of English-speaking communities. Other factors are internal ones that are offshoots of the first two. They are the gradual change in pronunciation, the too many existing homonyms and the numerous spelling rules. Others are the non-phonetic nature of English spellings and numerous spelling representations of a single phoneme etc.

"English spellings reflect the language's many etymological sources" (Tobi and Alan, 1997:704). The language has borrowed words from many other languages that are atypical of English morphology but have maintained their original spellings. Though the merging of these many languages has allowed a thorough infiltration of the English vocabulary, it has also introduced much anomaly in the spelling pattern of English. This is because borrowed vocabulary into English has, in almost all the cases, not undergone transformations to conform to the conditions of its new environment. Another factor close to this one is the spread of English speakers across the globe. Apart from speakers of other languages migrating from all over the world and settling densely in English speaking lands, there is the spread of English-speaking communities who also have spelling impact on the vocabulary of the language. These two factors have engendered an array of words with similar meanings that have positively made English very expressive. On the contrary, it has also introduced numerous homonyms whose spellings differ but are to a large extent pronounced alike as we can see from the list below:

Homonyms:	Pronunciation
Cite, sight, site	/suit/
Peace, piece	• /ralt/
Sew, so, sow	/s3o/
Vane, vain, vein	/vein/

These vocabulary items pose two fundamental problems. They are semantically misconstrued and the learner is often not able to distinguish and use them, correctly. Secondly, he finds their spellings conflicting and confusing too. Hunnicutt and Allen (1978:147) confirm this that "both spoken and written messages can be misunderstood. The vast majority of mistakes in spelling occur in homonyms". We feel that since readers have no recourse to clarification from writers about uncertainties emanating from write-ups, homonyms are undesirable and should be eliminated.

Letters of the English alphabet play too many roles. They may represent a particular sound at one instance. At another instance, single letters or multiple sequences of letters represent a common sound. They also provide information about other aspects of pronunciation and Rollins (2004:17) refers to such letters as "markers". For example, the silent "e" in the word "stage" (pronounced /stedy) marks a different pronunciation of the letter "g" in the word. This contrasts with the value of 'g' in word-final position as in "stag" (pronounced /stasg/). Letters can mark word-origin. In many words borrowed from Greek, 'y' represents the sound *III* e.g. 'myth'. Letters are also used in distinguishing between homonyms.

Sounds in homonyms are in many cases the same but the letters that are put together to constitute them can be different. This anomaly is similar to the internal irregularity where a single phoneme has numerous spelling representations. Sounds, as gotten from words, are sometimes arrived at as a matter of consensus rather than the pronunciation gotten from the supposed sound value of a letter or group of letters involved. A sound is orthographic ally represented in different ways by-different

written symbols. This is why English spelling, as it is said, does not in many cases determine pronunciation. It rather conforms more to established forms and as such creates inconsistencies. For example, the following words: **recipe**, **sew** and **schist** can always be mispronounced by many learners of English who at their first sight of the words may be "deceived" by the letters that form them. And it is most likely that many will still not be able to get their spellings correctly when the occasion demands. So it is quite impractical for learners of English to be attuned to the functions of letters of the alphabet. It is not only absurd the numerous functions letters of the alphabet play, their roles also make the spelling pattern of English irregular, difficult and complex. These artificially created mechanical complications can only be meaningful and useful when they resolve ambiguities. It is only then that our insistence on their usage will become justifiable otherwise, the negligence of serious issues to succumb to trivial ones and set unusual standards impossible to attain remains uncalled for.

Sometimes, in a component of a word for example, a given morpheme is represented with a single spelling but pronounced non-phonetically as illustrated below:

Word	Pronunciation
bomb	/b»m/
castle	/ka:s(5)l/
fasten	/fasdn/

In these words, the last letter "b" in the first word and the "t" in the last two words remain silent. It obviously becomes unclear when to observe this and when not to as this is not applied in all similar cases. Another controversy occurs when a particular feature is pronounced differently. This can be seen in the past tense suffix "-ed" that is variously pronounced as /t/, /d/ or /Id/: dip /dip/, dipped /dipt/, looted /lulld/

Here too, the spelling of these words does not correspond to their pronunciation and can often be misspelled and mispronounced. The situation where a phoneme has too many graphic representations remains a problem to many learners in the pronunciation of English words where they occur. But each of them appears to be appropriate to a particular phonetic context. It is however quite disputable as to whether or not any can be changed For one of the others in that context. It is further arguable if these spellings count for linguistic purposes since they all belong to the same phoneme as further illustrated hereunder:

Spellings	Words	Pronunciation
sh	shin	/ʃɪn/
ti	nation	/neɪʃn/
ci	special	/speʃl/
ssi	mission	/mɪʃn/
si	expansion	/ɪkspænsɪn/
ss	tissue	/tɪʃu:/
ch	machine	/məʃi:n/
s	sugar	/ʃʊgə(r)/
sci	conscience	/kɔʃəns/
ce	ocean	/əʃən/
sch	schmooze	/ʃmu:z/
sc	crescendo	/krəʃendəʊ/

"In a phonetic alphabet, one sound is represented by one and only one letter or combination of letters" (Nicholson, 1981:478). This facilitates accurate spelling and users can write without necessarily consulting authorities.

English spelling rules are too many. Some are helpful but others are too complicated and cannot be easily known and remembered. In plural formation for example, there are no clear-cut guidelines for spelling such that the formation patterns are irregular and complicated. For example, one of the general rules is that nouns ending in 'o' are made plural by adding "-s".

Singular	Plural
burro	burros
duo	duos
inferno	infernos
trio	trios

video	videos
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However, several nouns ending in "o" preceded by a consonant form their plurals by adding "-es"¹¹:

Singular	Plural
embargo	embargoes
hero	heroes
tomato	tomatoes

Yet another dimension of the rule is that other nouns ending in "o" may take either "-s" or "-es" in their plural form:

Singular	Plural
cargo	cargo s/cargoes
volcano	volcanos/volcanoes
tornado	tornados/tornadoes
zero	zeros/zeroes

Plural formation in English can be easily solved when we all come to consensus that the rule of regular formation of plurals should apply to all nouns. So words will take '-s' or '-es' to form their plural.

Spelling Reforms

After considering spelling irregularities that lead to severe difficulties for learners and the threat orthographic anomalies pose to our undeveloped mother tongues, it has become obviously pertinent to conceive some remedy - a call for simplified global spelling reforms to make spellings rationally consistent. English orthographic problems cannot be easily resolved by one English-speaking community. Nederlandse Taalunie, the Academic Francaise and the Accademia della Crusca are respective regulatory bodies for Nederland, France and Italy that regulate their languages. So Britain and America can also achieve uniform spelling reforms through a worldwide regulatory body directed towards curbing the existing anomalies that are also a serious problem to the two language communities. This when done and reflected in books, will have a binding effect on outside English-speaking communities as they too will gradually adopt the newly established spelling reforms. We can then borrow a leaf from the development and subject our mother tongues to much linguistic study to improve on their spelling patterns and guidelines for their growth and development.

The growth of our languages is dependent upon how much they feed on other languages "because of their varying status and the deficiency some have in expression" (Guma, 1998:1). Though every language adequately expresses the culture of its people, some lack vocabulary for things and concepts that are unique to other cultures. So they need to feed on the vocabulary of such communities for their growth and development. In this era of the computer, the screen culture and the search for a lingua franca, we as proponents of spelling reforms call for a deep study of all Nigerian mother tongues. Through this, we will impose some modification of customary spelling. This will help avert the pitfalls encountered in the English spelling system and as well remove or at least lessen the gulf between orthography and pronunciation. When we make the spelling of our indigenous languages phonetic in nature, pronunciation will automatically become the correct guide to their spellings.

Orthographic inconsistencies make the reading and writing of English and other languages in a similar situation complex and difficult. The introduction of some remedial spelling reforms will simplify their spellings. In the case of English, this undertaking will eliminate the irrational difficult spelling to which we and the world over are unsuccessfully forcing ourselves to become accustomed. It is not an uphill task, individuals or groups of prescriptivists and governments have, at different times promoted the cause of simplified spelling. For example, Sir Isaac Pitman, an English phonographer formed the Simplified Spelling Society in the 19th century. In the 20th century, George Bernard Shaw left part of his

fortune to promote the cause of simplified spelling (*The Encyclopedia Americana* vol.25, 1981:471). The late Governor Aper Aku of Benue State instituted a Committee of Language Reforms for the Tiv and Idoma languages. Us work was however abandoned in manuscript after the great man's overthrow and unfortunate demise.

Recommendations

1. The Federal Government should encourage more the study of our indigenous languages by:
 - a). Funding more the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba.
 - b). Awarding special scholarships to post-graduate students that undertake orthographic studies of our indigenous languages.
2. State Governments should all set up boards to serve as language regulatory bodies. The boards should be charged with the duties of coordinating language matters in their respective states and also liaising effectively with the National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba.
3. The National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba should get more committed for example, by publishing and circulating for sale all related literatures on language matters.

Conclusion

Correct spelling makes good writing. Writing is used in all educational fields and purposes therefore, it is mandatory to embark upon good writing. It entails knowing and distinguishing letters of the alphabet, making use of their conventional written forms and being able to spell words correctly.

To achieve numeracy and literacy competence which are basic challenges to all fields of our present educational pursuits, we need to strive against all deterring hurdles by employing suitable teaching methods. Our advocated simplified spelling reforms of English and our mother tongues have to be backed up with such approaches. The fundamental teaching of the ABC starts with its phonic reading to help learners associate the signs with their respective sounds. This facilitates correct reading, checks handwriting peculiarities and their possible culmination in mechanical inaccuracies capable of amounting to spelling mistakes.

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