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## Towards a Phonetic-Based Alphabet for Nigerian Pidgin

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### Abstract

*This paper makes a case for a phonetics-based spelling system for Nigerian Pidgin. It examines data from Warri, Delta State, Nigeria to demonstrate the phonetic basis for orthography development in relation to the principles of good orthographies of Williamson, (1984). The primary data are extracts from the speeches of sixty pidgin speakers, cutting across different age and social groups. The extracted items were transcribed in line with IPA recommended symbols and analyzed along-side the already transcribed secondary data that were sourced from published works in Nigerian Pidgin. The findings show that a spelling system (and orthography, in general) will not reflect actual use of language, and will not be user-friendly unless it is based on the phonetic reality of the actual use of the language for which it is intended. This paper concludes that thirty-seven letters are relevant to achieving this feat in Nigerian Pidgin.*

**Key words:** phonetic orthography, alphabet, Warri, Nigerian pidgin

## **1. Introduction**

Orthography is a set of spelling and writing conventions in a language. It is sensitive to language planning and consists of the symbols and rules that are users are expected to follow in writing a language (Williamson 1984:7; Okolo and Ezikeojiaku 1999:23). Agbo (2013) presents two approaches to the study of orthographies. The first approach involves the study of already established writing systems, usually with the aim of resolving its problems and recommending ways of updating and improving on them. The second approach involves a pilot study on a language with the aim of producing orthography, where none previously existed.

This study, which is on the orthography of Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth, NP), does not fall into any of the above approaches because the language has an existing writing system as illustrated in Omamor (1990a &b) Elugbe and Omamor (1991), Elugbe (1995), Jubril (1995) and Egbokhare (2001), but the system is neither established as that of well studied languages like English and French, nor approved by constituted authority. Although the existing methods of writing NP points to a plausible orthography, the lack of a regulated or generally accepted form does not offer a very firm foundation upon which a posteriori study can be based. The present study uses Warri Pidgin as a case to demonstrate a phonetic basis for the development of an alphabet for NP.

### **1.2 Warri pidgin**

Warri Pidgin is a variety of NP that is spoken in Warri, Delta State of Nigeria (Gani-Ikilama 1990, Faraclas 1996, Egbokhare 2001, Ihemere 2006, Mensah 2011, Mowarin 2010, Balogun 2013, Aziza 2015, Ehondor 2020 and Babalola 2021). It is very popular because of its distinct use of slangs and for its wide-spread use in the area where it serves both formal and informal purposes (Gani-Ikilama 1990, Elugbe and Omamor 1991, Holm 2000, Omozuwa 2003a,

Amao 2012, Osoba 2015, Babalola 2021). Warri Pidgin is a lingua franca in Warri. It is gradually developing into a creole (Faraclas 1996, Elugbe and Omamor 1991).

Most lexical items in Pidgin and, to some extent, their structural arrangements are drawn from Nigeria English (Jowit 1991, Ugorji 2010, 2013). Although studies exist on NP, much is left to be done in the area of its orthography. Currently, the language is written in what Elugbe and Omamor (1991:113) best describe as a “free for all”, where each writer uses what suits him/her. This free-for-all situation, it seems, is driven by the different phonological systems of the different Nigerian languages that form the substratum of NP. A writing system that is based on the phonological system of a language is a phonology-based orthography. Each language that contribute to NP structures comes with its own phonological intricacies, and to put them together as a phonology-based orthography for NP will no doubt carry-over the phonological differences of the various languages it consists. This paper has the objective of proposing a phonetic-based orthography for NP, thus bridging the gap of accuracy while writings in the language, given that the overall spoken realization of NP is generally the same across different regions of the country.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Pidgin and Nigerian Pidgin**

A pidgin is a communication system that develops out of language contact situation; hence it is termed a trade, contact, makeshift, auxiliary or marginal language (Reineke 1964, Todd 1974, Elugbe & Omamor 1991, Faraclas 1996). A pidgin is a hybrid of two or more languages, and becomes a necessity when there is the need for communication between people with different languages and neither of the groups is willing to learn the language of the other. The sociolinguistic process in which a pidgin develops involves a

dominant language that is known as the superstrate language and one or more dominated languages known as the substrates (Ifechelobi & Ifechelobi, 2015: 208).

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is the variety of pidgin that is spoken in Nigeria. It is described in Faraclas (1996:1) as “a link in a chain of English-lexifier pidgin and creoles spoken along the coast of West Africa and in African diaspora communities”. The multilingual nature of Nigeria makes NP a very important medium of communication that has features of English and several Nigerian languages. NP is a lingua franca in Nigeria and it has developed into a creole in some areas (Elugbe & Omamor 1991, Egbokhare 2001). In NP, English is the superstrate but words are also borrowed from other languages, including Spanish and French.

A number of works already exist on NP. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) provide what they called a sketch of the linguistic features of NP. The book covers several issues, including origin, theories, speakers, structures, scope, prospects, writing, policy and attitude towards NP. The study proposed twenty-one (21) consonants and seven (07) vowels for NP but no corresponding letters were proposed for the sounds. In Faraclas (196), which is based on the Port Harcourt variety of NP, twenty-two (22) consonants and seven (07) vowels were established. Faraclas (196) went further to propose some phonological rules in NP but did not establish any specific letter with which each sound is to be represented in writing. However, Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and Faraclas (1996) have remained notable and relevant to the study of NP till date. Esizimotor (2010) brought the question of orthography choice for NP into focus. The work reviewed several writing systems and opines that there should be a unification writing systems in NP into one that will be acceptable to all. However, in a different view, Ativie (2010) who presents a sociolinguistic survey

of NP concludes that the constantly widening use of NP makes it necessary for linguists to urgently develop a different and acceptable writing system for the language. Other aspects of NP for which previous studies are available include pluralization (Tagliamonte, 1997), NP in Nigerian linguistic ecology (Egbokhare, 2001), noun phrases (Ihemere 2006, Osakwe & Mowarin 2010), word formation and reduplication (Mensah 2011, Ugot & Ogundipe 2011), syntactic and semantic features (Balogun 2013, Aziza 2015), and lexical borrowing as a resource expansion strategy (Ofulue, 2015).

## **2.2 Phonetic Basis for Orthography**

A phonetic orthography is one which aims at an accurate production of the spoken form of the language in writing (Agbo, 2013:120). This kind of orthography is usually designed to reflect the speech realizations in the language, unlike a phonemic orthography where letters reflect the established phonemes in the language. A given sound can be said to exist in a language if the speakers of that language use it and can produce such sound in isolation. This justifies the position that for every phonetic sound in a language, there must be a corresponding orthographic symbol (Omozuwa, 2003b:313).

It is generally agreed by linguists that natural languages are spoken before they are written, and as Omozuwa (2003b, 2007, 2010) observes, the spoken realization of forms in a language should serve as the basis for the written forms. This phonetic-based written form eliminates as much as possible, ambiguity and inaccuracy in the writing system. This, it seems, explains why the alphabets of most African languages appear less ambiguous when compared to those of popular European languages such as English, French and German, since “the written forms of most African languages were developed based on the spoken forms” (Omozuwa 2007:157,

2010:1). Williamson (1984:1) suggests that the phonetic-based orthography is more user friendly, because

“In developing a written form of a language, our aim should be to make the written form agree closely with the spoken form...If this is well done, we should be able to read the language just as easily as we can understand people speaking it”.

Orthographies are therefore better when they are derived from phonetic realities of languages such that “each word is written the same way as it is pronounced in isolation” (Agbo, 2013:122).

As it is today, Nigerian Pidgin lacks an established phoneme inventory that is generally accepted and its use is still largely confined to the domain of social interaction without a developed writing tradition. Given this generally spoken status, therefore, phonetic data are greatly available for orthography development as in the several pockets of written texts that are found here-and-there on the language.

Many orthographies lack adequate representation of the sounds that they are used for (Elugbe 1991, Eustace 1996, Omozuwa 2003b). In an attempt to ensure better writing forms for languages, Williamson (1984) examined the various suggestions for orthography development and summarized them in the popular *five principles for a good orthography*:

- I) accuracy: “An orthography must agree with the sound system of the language for which it is intended” (Williamson, 1984:7). Each existing sound in a language should, by this principle, have different letters that represent them in the alphabets of that language. Bamgbose (1965:1) had earlier considered this as an important principle in orthography development, given

that when accuracy is lacking, an orthography becomes ambiguous.

- II) Consistency: An orthography can be said to be consistent if a given sound is represented by the same letter anywhere it appears. Consistency is very necessary in accessing an orthography (Omozuwa, 2007:168) so that words in the language are always spelt the same way, otherwise the writing system in such a language becomes chaotic.
- III) Convenience: As Williamson (1984:9) explains, “an orthography should be convenient to use. If there are too many symbols which are difficult to write or type or print, it will be too cumbersome and people will not bother to write it.” A good alphabet system should have forms that can be found in ordinary typewriters, that are easy to write, learn and teach to others.
- IV) Harmonization: A good orthography should be similar to those of neighboring languages (Williamson 1984, Omozuwa 2007). The letters, punctuation, etc. should resemble those of other close and familiar languages. This way, it is easy so resolve any problem of familiarity of the orthography and maintain harmony in the language and in relation to other languages around.
- V) Familiarity: Changes in orthographies should be very minimal so that they can “be as familiar as possible in appearance” (Williamson 1984:10). In line with this, Agbo (2013) posits that familiarity in orthography makes the users feel comfortable with it.

Furthermore, a good system of orthography must be socially acceptable in and around the speech community for which it is intended. When a writing system is a true reflection of the spoken form of a language, it is more likely to be readily accepted and utilized for literary and pedagogical purposes. Such writing systems are also of interest to language learners (Paulsen 2017, Angelelli, Marinelli, Putzolu, Notaricola, Laia and Burani 2017).

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs both primary and secondary data. The primary data includes several lexical items and utterances that were extracted from the recorded speeches of pidgin speakers. The informants include sixty-four (64) speakers of Warri Pidgin (including 30 males and 34 females) who have lived in the area for at least ten years, using different demographic variables including early formal education, first and other languages spoken, number of languages spoken, sex, place of early childhood, place of birth, age, among others. These variables help to ensure that the data includes samples from different sectors of the pidgin speaking population, representing an analysis of the language as generally used in Warri. Varied data as those collected for this study yield better generalizations. The informants were engaged in several free-flowing discussions and interviews on topics in which they are able to use the language in ordinary conversations. The extracted items were transcribed in line with IPA recommended symbols. The secondary data were sourced from Elugbe and Omamor (1991), Faraclas (1996), Egbokhare (2001) and Mensah (2011). The transcribed texts were organized and observed with the aim of bringing out the occurring sounds and representing them with appropriate orthographic forms. This was then compared to existing attempts (Elugbe and Omamor 1991, Faraclas 1996) at proposing writing systems for the language.



#### **4. Data Presentation and Analysis (A phonetics-based NP alphabet: A proposal)**

This section makes a case for a phonetics-based alphabet for NP (Nigerian pidgin). This suggestion is based on the realization that a language such as NP, with many regional variants, requires an orthography that captures the general speech forms that the language exhibits. The section is divided into two sub-sections: NP vowels and NP consonants.

##### **4.1 NP Vowels**

Previous assumptions on the vowels of NP recognize seven oral vowels, claiming that the language lacks inherent nasal vowels, as represented in the chart below.

1. NP Vowel chart (adapted from Elugbe and Omamor 1991:82, Faraclas 1996:250)

The chart is a trapezoidal vowel chart with a vertical line on the right side. The vowels are arranged as follows:

i		u
e		o
ε		ɔ
	a	

These are the established vowels in the language, seemingly in line with the attested vowels in many Nigerian languages. Although no specific explanation exists in the literature on the perception that only oral vowels exist in NP, it may be inferred that the cases of perceived nasality on vowels are accounted for in terms of nasal assimilation. The data available for the study show cases of vowel nasalization in the speeches of NP speakers. Consider the following.

2. High nasal vowels

- 
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>a) [ĩ]</p> <p>[wetĩ] ‘what’<br/>[nãfũnãfũ] ‘plenty’<br/>[piʒĩ] ‘pidgin’<br/>[rĩs] ‘rinse’<br/>[kĩg] ‘king’<br/>[ĩsaed] ‘inside’</p> <p>3. Mid-high nasal vowels</p> <p>a) [ẽ]</p> <p>[pẽ] ‘pain’<br/>[rẽ] ‘rain’<br/>[kẽ] ‘cane’<br/>[egẽ] ‘again’<br/><br/>[ẽʒɛ] ‘angel’</p> <p>4. Mid-low nasal vowels</p> <p>a) [ẽ̃]</p> <p>[dẽ̃ʒa] ‘danger’<br/>[fẽ̃t] ‘faint’<br/><br/>[sẽ̃ta] ‘center’<br/>[ripẽ̃t] ‘repent’<br/><br/>[bẽ̃bẽ̃] ‘multiple bends’<br/><br/>[tɛleviʃẽ̃] ‘television’</p> <p>5. Low nasal vowel</p> <p>[ã]</p> <p>[hãga] ‘hanger’</p> | <p>b) [ũ]</p> <p>[sũ] ‘soon’<br/>[wũd] ‘wound’<br/>[ɛvũ] ‘heaven’<br/>[ɛlevũ] ‘eleven’</p> <p>b) [õ]</p> <p>[õ] ‘own’<br/>[elõ] ‘alone’<br/>[lõ] ‘loan’<br/>[bõ] ‘bone (i.e. ignore)’<br/>[zõbi] ‘zombie’</p> <p>b) [õ̃]</p> <p>[ritõ̃] ‘return’<br/>[bõ̃] ‘give birth’<br/>[õ̃ku] ‘uncle’<br/>[sidõ̃] ‘sit-down’<br/>[sekõ̃d] ‘second’</p> |
|--|---|



- b) Kod [kod] ‘code’
- c) Hed [hɛd] ‘head’
- d) Det [det] ‘date’

#### 4.2 NP Consonants

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) record twenty-one (21) functional and four doubtful consonants in NP as shown below.

9. Systematic phonetic consonants of NP (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991:79)

	m	n	(n)	ŋ	(ŋw)				
p	b	t	d	(t)	dʒ	k	g	k̄p	ḡb
f	v	s	z	(z)					
		l							
		r	j					w	h

(Doubtful segments are placed in parenthesis)

The present study observes that some pidgin users usually produce [ʒ] in place of English [dʒ] as in;

10. a) [ʒɛnɛretɔ] ‘generator’
- b) [laʒ] ‘large’
- c) [mareʒ] ‘marriage’
- d) [keʒ] ‘cage’

[ŋ] and [ŋw] are also attested in NP data. Our corpus also show that [j] is sometimes replaced with [ŋ] while [w] is replaced with [ŋw]

by some speakers, in the context of nasalized vowels. Consider the following examples.

11. [ŋ]
- a) [ɲãm]/[jãm] ‘yam’
  - b) [ɲã̃]/[jã̃] ‘buttocks’
  - c) [ɲõg]/[jõg] ‘young’
  - d) [ɲã]/[jã̃] ‘yan’(talk)
  - e) [ɲãki]/[jã̃ki] ‘abroad/a person who has lived abroad’
  - f) [ɲãga]/[jã̃ga] ‘show off’
  - g) [ɲõda]/[jõ̃da] ‘yonder’
  - h) [ɲõ̃]/[jõ̃n] ‘yawn’
12. [ɲw]
- a) [ɲwã]/[wã̃] ‘one’
  - b) [ɲwã̃ɛ̃]/[wã̃ɛ̃] ‘wine’
  - c) [ɲwĩ̃]/[wĩ̃] ‘win’
  - d) [alɲwã̃s]/[alawã̃s] ‘allowance’
  - e) [ɲwã̃t]/[wã̃t] ‘want’
  - f) [ɲwõ̃m]/[wõ̃m] ‘warm’
  - g) [ɲwĩ̃j]/[wĩ̃j] ‘witch’

In Faraclas (1996), the following twenty-two consonants are identified for NP.

13. Consonants in NP (Faraclas, 1996:248)

	labial	alveola	post-alveolar
velar/glottal	labial-velar		
	Plosive/affricate		
	vɫ:	/p/	/t/
		/k/	/tʃ/
	vd:	/b/	/kp/
		/d/	/dʒ/
/g/	/gb/		
	Fricatives		

	vl:	/f/	/s/		/ʃ/
/h/					
	vd:	/v/	/z/		
Nasal					
		/m/	/n/		
/ŋ/					
Tap			/ɾ/		
Approximant-Central:					/j/
-Lateral:					/l/

Although, Faraclas (1996) recognizes the voiceless post-alveolar fricative [ʃ], the study excludes the voice counterpart [ʒ].

On the basis of the data analysis, the present study proposes that NP has the following consonants.

#### 14. NP consonant chart<sup>1</sup>

	Bilabial		Labio-dental		Alveolar		Post-alveolar		Palatal	Velar		Labio-velar		Glottal
<b>Plosives/Stops</b>	p	b			t	d				k	g	kp	gb	
<b>Fricatives</b>			f	v	s	z	ʃ	ʒ						h
<b>Affricates</b>							tʃ	dʒ						
<b>Nasals</b>		m				n			(ɲ)				(ŋw)	
<b>Trills</b>						r								
<b>Approximants</b>									j				w	
<b>Lateral</b>						l								

Based on the consonant chart presented above, the letters to represent each of the NP consonants are proposed as follow.

<sup>1</sup> [tʃ], [dʒ], [ɲ] and [ŋw] in our opinion do not have doubtful statuses but are considered to be varieties that are sometimes used in place of [ʃ], [ʒ], [j] and [w], respectively, especially by educated NP speakers.

15. NP consonant and their corresponding letters

a) **Labial**

Sounds	[p]	[b]	[m]
Letters	P	b	M

b) **Labio-dental**

Sounds	[f]	[v]
Letters	f	v

c) **Alveolar**

Sounds	[t]	[d]	[s]		[z]	[n]	[r]	[l]
Letters	t	d	s		z	n	R	l

d) **Post-alveolar**

Sounds	[ʃ] ([tʃ])	[ʒ] ([dʒ])
Letters	sh	j

e) **Palatal**

Sounds	[j] ([ɲ])
Letters	y (ny)

f) **Velar**

Sounds	[k]	[g]
Letters	k	g

g) **Labio-velar**

Sounds	[kp]	[gb]	[w] ([ɲw])
Letters	Kp	gb	w (nw)

h) **Glottal**

Sounds	[h]
Letters	h

In this phonetic-based alphabet, NP is found to have a total of twenty-eight (28) phonetically distinctive sounds, each of which are represented by an appropriate letter or a combination of letters (i.e. diagraph) in the orthographic system of the language. The advantage of this alphabet is that it relates more with the indigenous languages of NP speakers. This NP alphabet combines several sounds in Nigerian languages and English. It also eliminates spelling ambiguities and inconsistencies as much as possible.

The lexical disambiguation, which the phonetic-based approach offers, is central to the drive towards a befitting and adequate orthography for NP. It would make writing easier for users

of the language, and can enhance the utilitarian value of the language in areas such as publishing, mass media and education.

The proposed phonetic-based orthography is tested on the following rendition of the text extracted from a female informant speaking on her experience with hoodlums in Warri metropolis.

**Pidgin version:**

Tɔk abaot wɔri agbero laɛf an ɛɛ, ɔl dis dia yuzlɛs yuzlɛs karata we dɛm ɣɛt, de fɔstret pipo ɛni hao. Agbero dɛm bi vɛri yuzlɛs sɛt ɔf huma bin we bi se, dɛm no de wɔk bɔt dɛm de kɔlɛt mɔni. Draɛva we de fɔ stɛri de draɛv de od, i no de si mɔni, bɔt agbero we de rod i de flɛz, de gruv nɔma gruvɪn, bit pipo papa, bit pipo mama fɔ rod, i no kɛ. Agbero de wɔk frɔm mɔni tii ɛni taɛn we kaa stop to draɛv. Bɔt bifo na, no bi laɛk dat i bi o.

**English (free) translation:**

To talk about hoodlums in Warri and their useless (unfriendly) life styles: they frustrate people at will. These hoodlums are very useless human beings. They are jobless but extort monies from innocent citizens. A commercial driver who is on the wheel realizes little or no income but the hoodlums on the road live in plenty, enjoying themselves, beating up people's fathers and mothers without any remorse. They are around from morning till late in the night when there are no more vehicles on the road. However, it was never so before now.

**5. Summary and Conclusion**

This paper proposes a phonetic-based alphabet for NP, using Warri Pidgin as its case study. Issues that are discussed in the paper include the Warri Pidgin, an overview of the phonetic basis for orthography



development, principles of a good orthography, and a review of the literature on the NP sound system. The paper demonstrates that a spelling system that is based on the phonetic reality of a language is more user-friendly as it reflects the actual sounds used in the language in such a way that the language is written as it is spoken. The study concludes that twenty-eight letters, representing the sounds in the language, are required for the development of an appropriate writing system for NP.

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