

A Proposed Biseni Orthography

Worufah, Ebini-Piri Raphael

Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Abstract: *Biseni is a dialect of the Ijo language, and is spoken in the Northern extreme of the Taylor Creek in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The dialect is significantly divergent with other Ijo dialects, except for Okordia and Oruma (also called Yibama) with which it shares significant intelligibility levels; 80% for Biseni and Okordia, 66% for Biseni and Oruma. Biseni has no existing orthography, resulting in different and inconsistent spelling/writing patterns for constructions, words and even names in the dialect. This paper presents a proposed Orthography for Biseni and discusses issues related thereof, as part of efforts at developing and bequeathing a consistent written form for it.*

Key words: *Biseni, Orthography, Lenition, Vowel Harmony, Phonemic Split.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Orthography design involves reducing languages without any written form into writing. This includes matching the sound system of a language with writing symbols, in such a way that particular writing symbols are used to represent sounds in an accurate manner to guide against misrepresentation, ambiguity and inconsistency. Bangbose (1965, p.1) posits that a "...good orthography should represent all and only the significant sounds in the language", just as Williamson (1984, p.1) indicates that "in developing a written form of a language, our aim should be to make the written form agree closely with the spoken form", so people should be able to read the language the same way it is spoken, in that, every phonetic sound in the language is represented with a corresponding orthographic symbol.

The design and bequeathal of an orthography is a major language development effort, as the existence of an orthography for any language is a determinant of whether a language is developed or undeveloped.

Thus, this paper presents a comprehensive proposal on the orthography of Biseni, developed for the purposes of a unified standard writing system for education, the benefit and advancement of its speakers, general society and also contribute to linguistic knowledge.

2. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through elicitation in the form of oral interview, group discussions and applying the intuition of the researcher as well. Published and non-published materials relating to orthography design were consulted, while some audio recordings of connected speech and Biseni written scripts of our language consultants were also collected.

3. BISENI ORTHOGRAPHIC CONVENTION

Hitherto, Biseni had no existing orthographic convention. For this reason, many speakers struggle with the spelling of indigenous Biseni words and personal names, such that it is fairly common to find bearers of same name have different and very divergent spellings. In order to solve this problem,

this study presents a proposed orthography for Biseni as part of efforts at developing a written form and creating consistency in writing the dialect.

The orthography applies the principles of harmonisation with existing Ijo and other neighbouring orthographies and also applies the principles of economy and convenience in the use of diacritics like the subdot such that when one vowel sound in a simple word is spelt with a subdot it implies that other vowel sounds in the word also belong to the same set of contracted or [-ATR] vowels and assumed to have been subdotted and be pronounced accordingly. It should also be noted that when there is sameness or correspondence in sound segment between Biseni and English, the English letter is used to spell the sound, but a different letter or convention used when there is no such equivalence.

3.1 SOUND SEGMENTS

3.1.1 Implosives

Biseni has the voiced bilabial, alveolar and velar implosives: [b d ɡ]. It also has the voiceless and voiced labial-velar implosives: [kɸ ɡb]. Following the principle of harmonisation with other established Ijo and Nigerian languages orthographic conventions, these sounds are represented as follows:

(1)

[b]	→	b
[d]	→	d
[g]	→	g
[kɸ]	→	kɸ
[ɡb]	→	gb

3.1.2 Fricatives

The voiceless glottal fricative [h] occurs only in rallying calls in Biseni and indeed in other Ijo dialects, like in háán [háá] Izon or hiín [hií] Izon; the rallying call for the Ijaw ethnic nationality and all its people.

Unlike many other Ijo dialects where the voiced alveolar fricative [z] is very rare or a non-existent sound, Biseni attests this sound in its phonemic inventory:

(2) a. [izi] ‘fish’
b. [zimini] ‘black’
c. [za] ‘show’
d. [áziza] ‘broom’
e. [zikezike] ‘red’
f. [zinizini] ‘each other’

It is represented orthographically as ‘z’

3.1.3 Affricates

Biseni also attests the voiceless and voiced palato-alveolar affricates [tʃ] and [dʒ] which are represented in the orthography as ‘ch’ and ‘j’. Worufah (2007, p. 36-37) argues that the occurrence of these affricates in Biseni alone of all Ijo dialects, except Okrika can be traced to language contact with Ogbah and Ekpeye that share common borders with it at the eastern periphery. However, this present study has sufficient reasons to believe otherwise and argue that the occurrence of these sounds in Biseni is as a result of a paradigmatic phonological change called affrication (the conversion of another sound into an affricate), which may have stretched over a very long time. These are **lenition** and **phonological split**.

3.1.4 Lenition

It is also known as weakening and it affects consonants alone. This is as a result of humans preference for the use of less energy in their activities which in this case is the choice for less articulatory energy. An approximant requires less effort than a fricative, and a fricative also needs less articulatory energy than an affricate, just as an affricate requires less effort than a stop.

As a deliberate choice for less articulatory effort, lenition is fairly common and pervasive in human speech as the to and fro movement of speech organs between consonants and vowels require more articulatory efforts which lenition tends to ameliorate.

It is observed that the words with [ʃ] in Biseni have cognates in other Ijo dialects that Williamson (1992) referred to as Izon and Okordia; a sister dialect of Biseni, where the voiceless velar plosive [k] occurs in place of the Biseni voiceless palato-alveolar affricate [ʃ], thus justifying the argument for lenition:

(3)	Izon	Biseni
a.	ákí ‘take’	áchí ‘take’
b.	ikia ‘friend’	icha ‘friend of the opposite sex’
c.	kién ‘count’	chén ‘count’

	Okordia	Biseni
d.	ákitikí ‘darkness’	áchidichí ‘darkness’
e.	ekimu ‘wind’	echimu ‘wind’
f.	kién-bo ‘return’	chin-bo ‘return’

This situation is same with what is reported by Millar (2007, p. 73), where in the the city of Liverpool, word initial /k/ is said to have been lenited to the affricate [kx], and [k] in other positions has changed to [x], such that the following pronunciations are reportedly heard from speakers in that city:

(4)	a.	Key	as	[kx]ey
	b.	Kill	as	[kx]ill
	c.	Like	as	li[x]
	d.	Brick	as	bri[x]

Millar (2007) also reports that in an ancestral form of English, the words *cheese*, *child* and *chin* were also pronounced with an initial [k] as is found in German words where the sound is still retained:

(5)	a.	käse	‘cheese’
	b.	kind	‘child’
	c.	kinn	‘chin’

These findings support and consolidate the position that the sound [ʃ] in Biseni was lenited from [k] and that its presence in the phonology was not through borrowing occasioned by language contact. This also explains why the sound is found in basic vocabulary items:

(6)	a.	[áʃí]	áchí	‘take’
	b.	[ʃile]	chile	‘reject’
	c.	[itʃa]	icha	‘friend of the opposite sex’

3.1.5 Phonemic Split

It can be argued that the occurrence of [dʒ] in the phonemic inventory of Biseni is as a result of a phonemic split where the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate split into contrasting voiceless and voiced phonemes /ʃ/ and /dʒ/ in order to create symmetry in the consonant system. Given that all the plosives and fricatives in the dialect have voiced matching counterparts, except /h/ which is, in actual fact, a rare phoneme in Ijo, occurring only in [háá] or [híí] *haan or hiin Izon* rallying call words. The argument is that since plosives and fricatives already have the [+VOICE] and [-VOICE] distinctive features, the lenited [ʃ] has to also acquire a [+VOICE] counterpart for the purpose of avoiding a gap in the plosive/fricative consonant matching pattern, as affricates are a combination of plosive and fricative segments. This position is also supported by Millar (2007, p. 104) which states that “languages show a strong preference for symmetry in their phoneme systems....”

3.1.6 The Alveolar Trill /r/

This sound is not known as a segment that occur word initially in any Ijo dialect, but it is considered a distinctive sound in Biseni because minimal pairs can be found where its occurrence in one of the pairs results in meaning change:

(7) a. iru ‘drink(n)’
 igu ‘nail’

 b. éré ‘woman/girl’
 éfé ‘blow fire’

3.1.7 Nasalisation

The orthography also applies the principle of harmonisation by spelling words containing nasalised vowels with the letter ‘n’ preceding the nasalised vowel sound(s). This is in line with the established spelling convention of Ijo language where words with such nasalised vowels are spelt thus:

(8) a. [izõ] Izon ‘the name of the Ijaw people’
 b. [ï̄] iin ‘yes’
 c. [eríí̄] eríín ‘afternoon’

3.1.8 Vowel Harmony

This is a situation where vowels of a language are divided into distinct sets based on the tongue root feature [ATR] called Advanced Tongue Root. This is such that some of the vowels are produced with an expanded pharynx when the tongue root is advanced and others produced with a contracted pharynx when the tongue root is not advanced. An advanced tongue root vowel is [+ATR], while when the vowel is produced with a contracted pharynx and non-advanced tongue root it is [-ATR]. Vowels of either set do not mix in a simple word, however in Biseni only [a] appears to violate this rule as it co-occurs with both sets of vowels and is as such considered neutral in the nine vowel entry. The four [+ATR] vowels /e i o u/ are approximately the same sounds with their English counterparts and are also given same letters like is in English, but the [-ATR] vowels are spelt with a diacritic subdot placed below the letter thus:

(9) [ε] → ē
 [ɪ] → ī
 [ɔ] → ō
 [ʊ] → ū

3.1.9 Labial-velar Stop

The use of the diagraph ‘gb’ is now fully established as the letters for spelling the voiced labial-velar stop in Nigeria and it is adopted in this orthography.

4. BISENI ALPHABET

The alphabet is made up of thirty-six (36) letters.

Capital Letters:

A B B̄ CH D D̄ E Ē F G Ḡ GB ḠB H I Ī J K
KP K̄P L M N NY O Ō P R S T U Ū V W Y Z

Small Letters:

a b b̄ ch d d̄ e ē f g ḡ gb ḡb h i ī j k
kp k̄p l m n ny o ō p r s t u ū v w y z

Letters	Phonetic symbols	Words	Gloss
a	[a]	árú	‘canoe’
b	[b]	bíná	‘pain’
b̄	[b̄]	b̄ila	‘seed’
ch	[ʃ]	ch̄ein	‘count’
d	[d]	desi	‘jump’
d̄	[d̄]	índó	‘breast/suck’
e	[e]	ere	‘woman/girl’
ē	[ē]	silē	‘select’
f	[f]	firi	‘work’
g	[g]	giri	‘lock’
ḡ	[ḡ]	gé	‘only’
gb	[gb]	gbila	‘fold’
gb̄	[gb̄]	ímgb̄éé	‘today’
h	[h]	háán	‘rallying call’
i	[i]	igwa	‘beans’
ī	[ī]	líká	‘needle’
j	[dʒ]	jina	‘resemblance’
k	[k]	kani	‘pluck’
kp	[kp]	kpa	‘plait/peel’
k̄p	[k̄p]	akp̄ida	‘prawn’
l	[l]	silē	‘select’
m	[m]	múnú	‘sleep’
n	[n]	níí	‘four’
ny	[n̄]	anyinya	‘horse’
o	[o]	ópúrú	‘crayfish’
ō	[ō]	ogún	‘orange’
p	[p]	pírá	‘carry’
r	[r]	iru	‘drink(n)’

s	[s]	sili	‘money’
t	[t]	teri	‘cover’
u	[u]	furo	‘intestine’
ụ	[ʊ]	oburobø	‘cassava’
v	[v]	ívii	‘fight’
w	[w]	wári	‘house’
y	[j]	yeri	‘sell’
z	[z]	zimini	‘black’

4.1 SAMPLE TEXT (CULLED FROM WORUFAH 1997)

Biyagile ni fó mémá. Ni mú fó lasa, ni máki yemini tuboní achisa, ni wónuní i yóó-tubø édan mémá. I yóó-tubø síní zúún pílé yóó ke síní yen yenma. Ni mú owiye édan mú o lása, ni mó o mó máki édan kóló sun. Wá édan súní bítorú do. Wá bítorú domíní déínsa, ogo máki bó álié mítémúnú, ogo bó boru-énii ke latémúnú. Ni ákímé táá, ogo móké mísú wa! Be ni chiní wári-é mémá ogo lású. Ni máki mó fesi-bé, ni bó édan doní bée-á ni máki wónú-ní wári-é mémá. Ni máki mó fesi-bé, ni bó édan doní bée-á ni máki wónú-ní wári-é mémá. Ni mú wári lása, ni máki yé fí. Ni yé físa, gémá yemini sún dúbó-bé, ni bo ni fun achiní baayá kila yemini ge. Ni yé gémíni deen-sini dia, ogo má mísú, yé kpá ponu bó i deensú. Ni ákímé táá, ni wóni i yóó-tubø ni wamini wári kón sún-e kpá arísí ke ni wári-é bó múnú súnámá. Ni mó fesi-bé, ni máki soru-séa, ni mú i yóó-tubø édan la. Ni mó o mó kóló sitee, kóló sitee-sa, ni máki chiní wári-é bó. Ni bó wári lása, ni máki múnúsúnámá. Bée ni egberi kúnú fa édan.

4.1.1 TRANSLATION OF THE SAMPLE TEXT

Yesterday, I went to the market. When I got to the market, I bought some items. After buying the items, I went to meet my friend who works in a barber’s shop. On meeting him, we stayed there for some while and had some discussion. After discussing for a while, I discovered that it was already evening. On the discovery that it was already evening time, I said alas, I have to go back to the house. Then I left that place and went to the house. On reaching the house, I had my meal. After my meal, because I had certain things to write, I brought out my book and did some writing. After writing for some while. I discovered again that the day was far spent and I was tired. Then I said alas, I will have to go visit one of my friend that stays nearby, after which I will come back and have my sleep. So, as I said that then I stood up and went to my friend’s place. I and my friend had some brief moments of playing together, after which I came back to the house. When I later came back to the house, I then had my sleep. This is the end of my story.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper presented a proposed orthography for Biseni; a hitherto unwritten dialect of Ijó. The contents of the paper and indeed the proposals herein are a first effort at bequeathing a consistent writing system for the dialect and is recommended for use in writing and production of textbooks as well as other instructional materials for teaching and learning Biseni. It is hoped that speakers who are desirous of spelling Biseni names and words in a way that appropriately matches sounds and morphemes with writing would find in this paper a resource for regular consultation and guidance.

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