Abstract

The Nwagu Aneke syllabary, the thrust of this paper is an indigenous script developed or invented by Ogbuevi Nwagu Aneke, a spiritualist from Umuleri, Oyi Local Government of Anambra state, south east of Nigeria. Interestingly, the script which qualifies by all linguistic standards as a syllabary which is one of the known writing systems that had been classified by linguists. The paper seeks to ascertain these features that gives the script its status as a syllabary and also looks at phonological features as well as other linguistic features inherent in the script. The paper looks at the correspondence between the syllables and the graphic symbols, the representation of syllables involving freely fluctuating members of a phoneme, the symbolization of initial vowels, and syllabic nasals in the script.

Introduction

The thrust of this paper is the Nwagu Aneke syllabary, a writing system invented by a native of Umuleri who was purportedly inspired by a dream. We shall analyze the syllabary to establish it as a syllabary going by the features that a syllable should observe. We are of the opinion that there exists few scholarly works on the Nwagu Aneke syllabary from a “dibia”, non-literate in the English language. These previous works include, Nwagu Aneke Project Proposal (henceforth, Proposal), Nwoga (1991 and 1991b) Ahamefula, (1995) Agbedo (2000) and Ahamefula (2010). Agbedo (2000) briefly discussed the linguistic nature of the script.

From the foregoing, we can see that not much work has been done on the phenomenal writing system originating form the ingenuity of a Nigerian. The script is a discovery of a writing system that qualifies by all standards as a syllabic writing system which can compare favorably with other syllabic writing system in the world especially the syllabaries that have been identified in the West African sub region. Hence, this paper reviews and analysis the phonological as well as other linguistics features of the Aneke script. It shall make a good study to see how the linguistic naive Aneke invented a script that is sensitive to the grammatical features of Igbo.
Methodology

The study relied mainly on primary source data. However, an informal interview with the than secretary of the Nwagu Aneke Research team was very resourceful. In the course of the study, various journals, encyclopedia, books, seminar papers and conference papers were consulted.

The analysis is based on the detailed and intensive study of these materials as well as original manuscripts transcription of the Aneke syllabary. A systematic transcription of the script was also carried out. The understanding that the script was based on the phonological features of the Umuleri dialect help a lot in this research.

Background to the study

Aneke, the protagonist of our study became a ‘dibia’ by contact with the spirit beings (Nwoga: 1991). This contact and communion with the spirit world later lead to a linguistic breakthrough. According to his testimony which is well documented in the Proposal (nd). He was taught to develop a writing system by his cosmic “lecturers” following patterns he found on tree leaves in the early 1960’s


It is interesting to note that Aneke’s dream experience before the invention of the syllabic writing system, the focus of our study, is not different form the dream other west Africans had before they invented their own syllabaries. The only difference lies in the message that Aneke’s writing seeks to convey to the Igbos, which is also relevant to the black race.

Dalby (1970) and Stewart (1967) identified the following West African syllabaries. Vai syllabary of Liberia, and Sierra Leone Mende. Kikaku syllabary, Loma syllabary Barmum syllabary of Cameroun and the Bagan or Eghap syllabary devised in Cameroun but reputedly based on the Barmum syllabary. Dalby (1970) did extensive work on West African writing systems and discovers that most indigenous African writing systems are syllabic. In this system each symbol stands for the distinct syllables of a language. The syllabic writing system marked a very important stage in the development of writing systems. It is at this stage that writing systems became phonologized. (Dalby, 1970). The logographic or pictorial writing system came before the syllabic writing system while the alphabetic came after the syllabic writing system.
alphabetic writing system symbols used represent distinct phonemes rather than syllables.

Trager (1974) has carried out a detailed study on writing system of the world and observes that writing is a symbolization of any language. Whenever, there is a systematic representation of linguistic elements: Specific morphological (words), phonological (phonemes, syllables) items, then there is writing. Agbedo (2000:77) observes that “scripts referred to as syllabic are segmentally based insofar as the shape of the graph is relatable to sound segments of the syllable.

Trager (1974) also notes that a writing system whose symbols represent mostly syllables are syllabaries while the new encyclopedia Britannica (1992:43) (henceforth, Encyclopaedia) supports this description, “the syllabary is a set of written symbols used to represent the syllables of the words of a language”.

Again, the Encyclopaedia (1992) goes ahead to explain the characteristics of different types of syllabaries. It observes that some syllabaries include separate symbols for each possible syllable that may occur in the language; others use a system of consonant symbols that include an inherent vowel. In the former type of syllabary, there will be separate symbols representing such syllables as ‘ka’, ‘ke’ ‘ki’ ‘ko’ and ‘ku’; whereas in the later types of syllabary a symbol for ‘ka’ can be paired with a symbol for the vowel ‘e’ to represent ‘ke’.

Other types of syllabaries combine syllabic symbols to represent syllables for which there is no one symbol; in such systems for example there may be no symbols for ‘kan’ ‘ken’ ‘kin etc. Syllables of this type might be represented in such a system by combining the symbol for ‘ka’ with that for ‘an’ to form ‘kan’ (ka-an)

Trager (1974) comments on the phonological system of the syllabary and notes that a syllabic writing system is apt to be rather consistent in the representation of phonemes such the each sequence of CV or CVC is usually written in the same way every time, regardless of its morphonic or morphemic structures. He goes ahead to say that once syllabic writing has been achieved. The step to a phonemic system, in which an individual phoneme is represented by a single symbol, is easy. The Aneke syllabary and his manuscript have many aspects for study. However, this paper is limited to the linguistic study of the script. The Encyclopaedia (1992) discussed the number of symbols required in a syllabary. It explains that though the syllabic writing system is an improvement on the logographic system which requires thousands of symbols, they are still much bulkier than the symbols required in the
The alphabetic writing system. The alphabetic writing system has the lowest set of symbols possible for representing the sounds of any language. Ndukwe and Ogwueleka (1989) assert “while it requires only 36 letters (28 consonants and 8 vowels) to write standard Igbo in the Roman or Latin alphabetic script, an adequate syllabary would require 28x28 (224) symbols to perform the same task. A syllable can be made up of initial consonant, middle vowel and final consonant. Here the syllable is closed. However, we can have an open syllable with an initial consonant and a vowel. Again, the syllable can be made up of a single vowel. Furthermore, syllabic nasals and syllabic laterals can form a syllable on their own. These are the syllabic consonants.

The Nature of the Aneke Syllabary.

The Proposal (nd) comments on the grammatical features of the script and observes that the Aneke syllabary is a complete writing system founded on the phonological structure of the Umuleri Igbo with features which can accommodate other African languages. On the nature of the symbols used in the script Ndukwe and Ogwueleka (1989) note that the Aneke syllabary consists of a set of arbitrary marks symbols which have little or no direct correspondence with the sound patterns of the syllables they are meant to represent. They observe. That these characters or symbols are simply in geometric shapes consisting mainly of straight lines, curves and angles.

The Linguistic Features of the Aneke Script.

As earlier noted, the syllabary is based on the phonological system of the Umuleri dialect of Igbo. The syllabary analyzed the Igbo language having only the CV syllables whereas there exists other syllables made up of single vowels and the syllabic nasals and syllabic laterals. Hence we have situation where Igbo is analyses as CV syllable, we shall have up 244 symbols but the Aneke syllabary has about 164 symbols. Most of the syllables are represented by the same graphic symbol. Interestingly, most of the syllables so represented have vowels that belong to the same vowel harmony set. This will definitely lead to ambiguity and inconsistency. Williamson (1984:8) quotes wolf and observes that “Consistency means that any letter or letter combination should stand for the same sound or sounds throughout the system”. In the Aneke syllabary there are also cases where a syllable is being represented by two symbols.
In representing syllables that are in free venation the syllabary took a pragmatic and economic consideration. All syllables that have /f/ and /v/ are represented with the same symbol respectively there could no other reason for this than the fact that the phoneme /f/ is not frequently used in the Umuleri dialect of Igbo on which the syllabary is founded. Hence, in his writings, Aneke represented afo (market day), ife (thing) and Ogbuefi (title) as avo, ive, and Ogbuevi respectively. Though the Aneke’s script is a syllabary it has a peculiarity of a pictograph or logogram in that there are some lexical items that are represented with one symbol. They include ana, ovia, asafo, enu, onwa, ili, izu, akwukwo, uka etc.

**Treatment of Syllabic Nasals and Vowels in the Script.**

The script lacked representation for initial vowels, post vocalic vowels and syllabic nasals. If there is no provision in the Aneke syllabary the script for the representation for the representation of both vowels and syllabic nasals; how did Aneke handle this in his manuscript? For the demonstrative ‘a’ inwe/nwa’ is used. Thus, such constructions as akwukwo a (this book) comes out as ‘akwukwo nwa ‘nwa’ is used here because it agrees with the vowel harmony set in ‘akwukwo’. ‘nwe’ would be used as demonstrative instead in agreement with vowel harmony set of the 'heavy' vowels (eiou). Hence, such constructions as ‘ive e’ (this thing) will come and as ‘ive nwe’

Most vowels at syllabic initial position are handled through the observation of assimilation process in Aneke’s writing especially in auxiliary verb constructions. Hence, ‘ja-agu’ comes out as ‘jagu’ ‘je-ede’ as ‘jede’ and ‘ne-ede as ‘nede’ here the vowel in first syllable position assimilates the following vowel syllable in the following construct, therefore it becomes necessary to represent the first vowel system in this situation.

The system of eliminating either of the co-occurring vowels justifies the non-inclusion of a symbol to represent the apostrophe that is used in the Roman script for Igbo. Such construction as ‘na Igbo, (in Igbo) has the vowel in Igbo assimilating the preceding vowel to give us ‘nigbo’. This is a clear case of retrogressive assimilation. We note that most vowels in this system are to be inferred. Such constructions as ‘tie nye ive ozo’ (if you add anything else) comes out as ‘tie nye ive zo’ in the script

The first person pronoun is written as ‘mu’. Such words as eziokwu will be written as “zi kwu” ‘ive ndi mmo bueli mu bu okwuokwu” will be
written as ‘ve di mo bu li mu bu kwu kwu kwu kwu’ (the burden that the spirits have laid on me is the burden of speech)
The syllabic nasals which have no representation at all in the script will have to be inferred. ‘Ndu’ (life) is written as ‘du’ ndi (those) is written as ‘di’. However most syllabic nasals which occupy the first syllable position of lexical items are easily inferred. ‘Mmo’ is written as ‘mo’ (spirit) mmili (water) is written as ‘mili, mmaya’ (wine) as ‘maya’, mmadi as “madi’.

**Spelling Rules/ Word Division**

Word division has been an issue in the writing of Igbo using the Roman script. Thus, Williamson (1984:4) quotes Wolf “the most difficult problem remaining after the alphabet itself is made is the problem of what can be, or cannot be written as a world”.

We observe that in the Aneke syllabary there are no clear word boundaries. The symbols representing syllables occur freely side by side one another without any indication of where one word ends and the other starts. Though, this has its challenges for one using the script, the problem of what should be written together or written separately has been eliminated. For example, the issue of how reduplicated nouns or nominal phrases should be written whether together or separate does not arise.

Hence, for such reduplicated nouns as oso oso (quickly) ewu ewu (foolishly). Whether to write them together ooso, ewuewu, is not a problem because no two symbols are combined in the syllabary. Therefore, all the syllables in the above constructions are written separately using the Aneke syllabary. Moreover, for nominal phrases, the attendant issue of whether to write them separately or not is not been solved by the Aneke syllabary. Thus, for ‘nwaada’ (eldest daughter) one should not bother whether to separate ‘nwa’ from ‘ada’ with a dash (nwa-ad) or write them separately (nwa ada) because the syllabary does not make provision for joining any syllables to another one. This same treatment goes for all kinship terms such as nwanne (brother) nwanna (half brother, kinsman), umuaka (children).

On the problem of diacritics, the Aneke syllabary does not dispense with the use of diacritics; hence, the application of diacritics has been eliminated.

Thus, one may conclude that if the problem of word division inherent in the Roman script could be taken care of by the Aneke script, it then follows that the graphisation problems in Igbo may as well be due to the type of script adopted.
Treatment of Tonal Features:

There is no indication of tone in the script. Tone is distinctive or contrastive in Igbo. Tone, a suprasegmental feature is phonemic in Igbo and plays a very important role in the Igbo phonology. Hence, tone is fundamental in the phonological system of Igbo. And there should be a representation of tone in writing Igbo. However, it is pertinent to note that the Roman script itself does not make provision for tonal representation in Igbo. The tonal representations we have today are as a result of the contributions or efforts of orthography designers.

Recommendations

The issues of syntax need to be addressed in using the script. The script has little or no syntactic input. Besides, the absence of punctuation means that it would be difficult for one not too familiar with the script to distinguish between words, phrases and sentences. Hence, to make for clarity and ease when reading or writing in the script punctuation marks need to be introduced.

Again, there is need for tonal and vowel symbolization in the script. There is also the need for reconstruction and standardization of the script. There are many instances where syllabaries have been reconstructed in the past. Dalby (1970:109) observes that the Vai syllabary was standardized from 1900, 70 years after its invention. Also the Barnum syllabary according to Dalby (1970:112) was “progressively simplified and rationalized.”

Conclusion

Following observation and findings on the Aneke script, it qualifies as a syllabary having followed linguistic principle of representing distinct syllables with a symbol. The script interestingly makes provision for some phonological processes like assimilation. Both progressive and retrogressive assimilation were observed in the study of the script and writings done in the script. Again, the problem of word division is tactically eliminated as the script does not dispense with the word as a unit of analysis even though few words were represented each with a symbol in the syllabary.
References


## Syllabary of the Nwagu Anike Script

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Word</th>
<th>Syllabary of the Nwagu Anike Script</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>