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A DEMOCRATIC IGBO ORTHOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

From the earliest attempt at Igbo codification by the protestant missionaries and the Igbo ex-slaves resettled in Sierra Leone to the present day, Igbo orthography is associated with criticisms, suspicion and conflicts (Ogbo 1984; Achebe 1984; Capo 1990; Uwalaka 2001; Ugorji 2003, 2005, etc.). While the introduction of the official Onwu orthography of 1961 seemed to have resolved the seven-decade fiendish orthography controversy which bedevilled the development of the language, it actually only resolved those controversies that came along religious lines involving the Roman and Protestant Missions. This study identifies two other problems, namely the linguistic and the sociological, that are yet outstanding: hence the recent and sustained complaints about literary constraints, dialect exclusion (detailed in Ugorji 2003, among others) and the diversionary linguistic engineering involving the dialects of Izii, Ezaa, Ikwo, Ikwere, Ika, etc. Following the imperatives of the new world democratic order (Emenanjo 2002), this paper suggests a democratic and integrated orthography, built on the principles that preserve citizens' personal and collective linguistic rights as well as linguistic and cultural diversity. In Ugorji (2003), the principles for language and dialect vitality are outlined; the concern of the present work is to show how the tenets are implemented in Igbo graphisation as a case in point. More importantly, it is an effort to demonstrate how language or dialect vitality option proves to be a solution to conflicts associated with language or dialect, and a means to implement the democratic demands for sociolinguistic equity, enunciated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996), the *Declaration of Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992), among others, which seek to assert the rights of individuals and communities.

KEYWORDS: Igbo; orthography; dialect community; linguistic rights; sociolinguistic equality.

1. Introduction

Igbo is one of the most populous ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria; and the Igbo language is one of the three major national languages in Nigeria. It is characterized by nu-

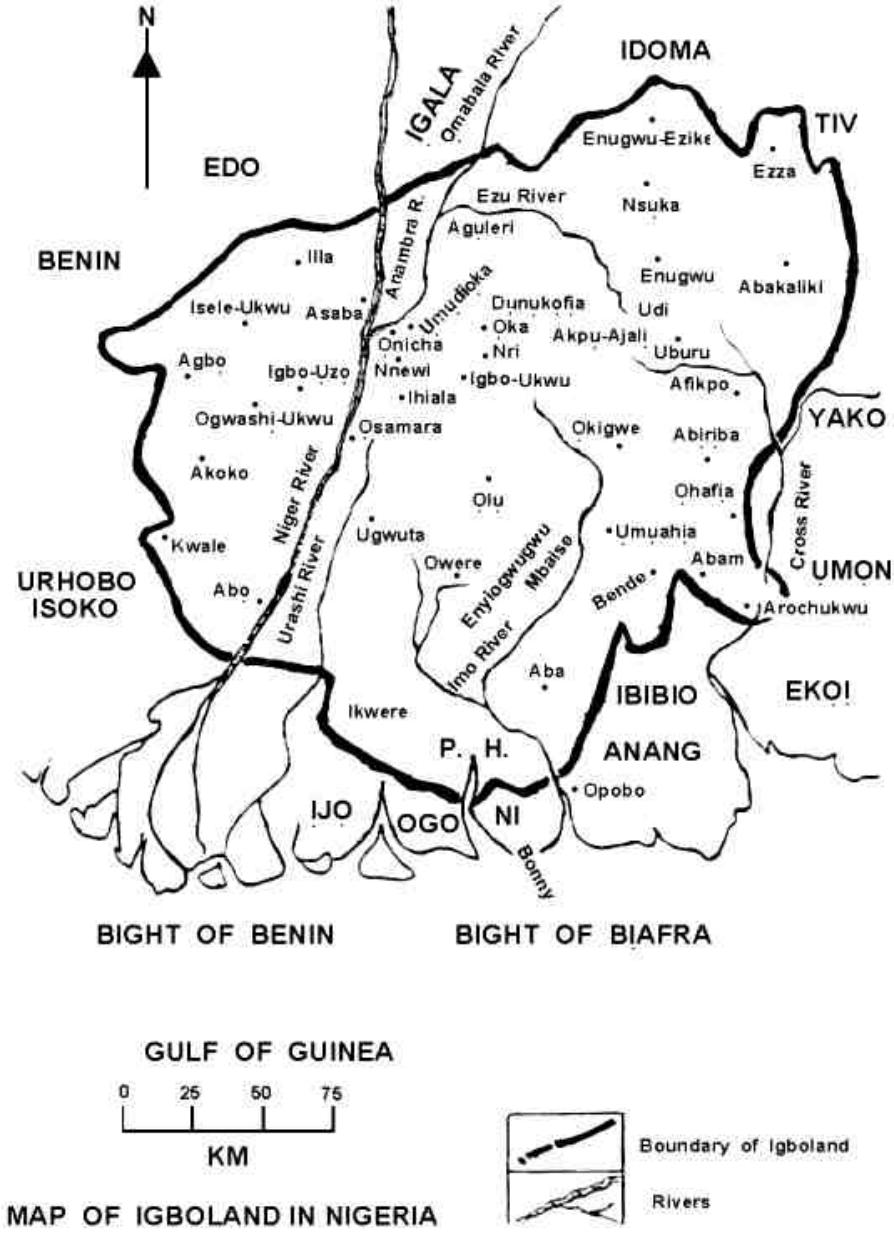

Figure 1. Map of Igboland. (From http://igbology.igbonet.net.)

merous dialects (see map in Figure 1) with associated subcultures and linguistic peculiarities; and dialect loyalty is quite real among the dialect groups (see Ugorji 2003). Scholars agree (Ugorji 2005, 2003; Uwalaka 2001; Achebe 1984; Nwachukwu 1983, etc.) that the official Igbo orthography as a material for literacy, preservation of records, etc. in language development is deficient in its current state, when viewed against the new world demands for language vitality, at least.

Orthography is part of the basic resources of a language which is created through a rational language development initiative usually by experts and the political class in more ideal circumstances. It involves assigning alphabets or symbols to speech sounds or features to enable literacy in a given language or its varieties guided by certain principles (see Williamson1984). It may also be referred to as a process of graphisation; that is, evolving a writing system. Orthography development is thus a fundamental part of language planning efforts directed towards establishing or altering the functions of languages or their varieties in given nations, solving communication problems or problems associated with language use in given domains; or simply part of the maintenance and management of a language as an aspect of socio-economic resources and the equitable distribution of such resources for maximum benefits. It therefore has implications for the esteem of linguistic groups, the linguistic rights of minorities as well as speakers of major languages; namely, it can promote or prevent the use of a language or its varieties, discourage or encourage and empower speakers or otherwise, by according higher status to favoured varieties, and hence their speakers, and lower status to unfavoured varieties and their speakers. But bearing in mind that language loyalty may be stronger than national loyalty (Ugorji 2003; Emenanjo 2002; Lutz 1995, etc.), language planning must respect equity and the linguistic rights of individuals and communities in the new world democracy. This democracy arouses self-consciousness in individuals, groups of people and nations, and spurs them to assert themselves and their independence towards stronger cohesion, cultural integration and unity among peoples. In the new world democratic sensibility, then, recognition for ethno-linguistic loyalty is an imperative; and at its base are the cultural, sub-cultural, linguistic and sub- linguistic (or dialect) entities which constitute the aggregate macro ethno-linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics of given people or community groups.

2. The development of orthography in a historical perspective

From the earliest efforts at constructing an Igbo orthography up to recent times, complaints, suspicion and conflicts have been associated with the orthography. While the introduction of the official (Onwu) orthography in 1961 with the strong support of the political class seemed to resolve the battle drawn between the Protestant and the Roman missions, it nevertheless left questions along both linguistic and sociological lines; hence this paper. In Ugorji (2003), we outline the efforts to develop the language, beginning with the construction of the orthography, and show that from the Isuama solu-

tion (see below) by the Protestant missionaries and Igbo ex-slaves in Sierra Leone, to the later Onwu orthography, no effort has been found satisfactory. Below we cull some further details of the experience for needed emphasis.

The earliest attempt at Igbo literacy was the conception of the Protestant missionaries and the Igbo ex-slaves resettled in Sierra Leone. Their effort led to the emergence of the Isuama Igbo, an Igbo-based pidgin which was rather foreign to the Igbo homeland and was therefore rejected.

Next was an attempt to create an Igbo variety that might command wide acceptance, the Union Igbo, which tried to build a synthesis, as it were, of noncontiguous Bonny, Owere, Onitsha, Arochukwu and Unwana dialects. Again, this multi-dialect amalgam created by the Protestant mission with its base at Egbu (Owere) failed to resolve the dialect diversity problem in Igboland, as it was said to be an Esperanto of a sort (cf. Uwalaka 2001; Capo 1990), even though it survives today in the Protestant *Bible* and liturgy as a religious register, and is very much intelligible to its user community (see Uwalaka 2001). The quest to evolve a "pan-Igbo" dialect or a standard Igbo dialect was pursued by Ida Ward and others who adopted the Central Igbo dialect; that is, the dialect(s) of the area geographically central to the Igbo nation. It represented implicitly an attempt at resolving the dialect conflicts by adopting the variants that seemed naturally evolving to become (a) pan-Igbo dialect(s), to serve literacy needs, among other things. This attempt seemed particularly more promising because both the Northern and the border dialects show much more affinity to the Central dialects than to the Onitsha dialect which was the only possible rival, being promoted by the Roman mission which had settled at Onitsha by the 19th century. This dialect had the advantage of dispensing with (the notion of) dialect abstractions or creation of artificial dialects to evolve a standard dialect.

The greatest opposition to the central Igbo experiment came from the Roman mission which adopted the Onitsha dialect; and the fact that the Onitsha variety is phonologically less complex than the central dialect gave it an advantage, as it was easier to deal with the Onitsha dialect than the central dialect. But as Armstrong (see Uwalaka 2001) argues, having to write the Olu, Owerre, and Ohuhu dialects in the much simplified Onitsha dialect would result in much ambiguity and loss of poetic subtleties. While, as Uwalaka (2001) observes, a study of the central dialects may amount to the study of Onitsha dialect, the reverse is not true.

Thus, the central Igbo solution failed to receive wide acceptance, as shown in the orthography dispute between the Protestant and the Roman missions, which lasted till the introduction of the Onwu orthography by the then government of Eastern Nigeria in 1961. By this, standard Igbo was given a footing. Following its development, the evolving standard Igbo no longer belongs to a given dialect community, as its Onitsha-based phonology and central Igbo lexicalization has been enriched from different dialects and loans from English as well as metalanguage development from the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC).

The evolving standard and its wide use in publications since the 1960s notwithstanding, dialect suspicion and conflicts, with associated complaints of oppression, imposition or marginalization, still linger among dialect communities and elites who have remained restless as a result. Pertinent to this is the rather counterproductive efforts represented in some diversionary or reactionary language planning involving Ikwere, Ikwo, Ika, Izii, Ezaa and so on, apparently directed towards exclusionary isolation of Igbo linguistic communities. Research has stressed that recognition for dialect diversity is crucial to language vitality (Emenanjo 2002; Ugorji 2003, 2005). But the current official Igbo orthography as a material for literacy, among other things, in language development, is deficient in its current state and is therefore not in good standing to facilitate language and dialect vitality; hence the reactionary moves and complaints mentioned above.

The contention may be thought to be along the lines of dialect selection; that is, which dialect is selected for standardization (Ogbo 1984), which may however be only incidental to the contentions on orthography. Achebe (1984: 94) appears quite clear-minded about this and directs attention to what lies at the centre of the controversies, namely the orthography, which he describes (referring to Onwu orthography) as a "straightjacket" and as an "instrument of torture to poets who write" other dialects. He advocates "Natural Selection" as a solution to the orthography controversy, by which he proposes that literary works should be carried on in all and every author's dialect, whereby, in due course, one dialect may assert itself; that is, a survival-of-the-fittest kind of approach, which, of course, licenses linguistic anarchy, a dialect Babel, which may be unproductive, as it may set back the hand of the clock to the earlier stages of the fiendish orthography controversies. However, he does not spell out how this could be implemented, particularly as the dialects are not empowered to achieve literacy: how can, for instance, an Mbaise author write what could consistently be recognized as a linguistic property of his dialect if no orthography permits him to indicate contrastive nasality and aspiration. More precisely, if his piece of poetry contains a pun on /ãr̃á/ 'breast' and /árá/ 'madness', how does he indicate this difference in writing?

Uwalaka (2001), among others, notes that the conflicts have deep political underpinnings, as even the religious considerations that seemed further to complicate the controversies are not in themselves apolitical. Yet not much is done to evolve solutions to match. Since many of the conflicts or suspicions against one dialect or one orthography system and another are often nonlinguistic, solutions to them might as well not be purely linguistic; they should rather be sociolinguistic and holistic.

We thus recognize that the linguistic, the sociological and the political issues associated with the dissatisfaction with the Igbo orthography in its present state are intricately interwoven. While the earlier controversies were hosted by the early religious bodies, they were in their spirit political. These seem to have been resolved somewhat by the introduction of the official (Onwu) orthography with a strong backing of the Government in 1961. However, the complaints about the orthography include that it is an imposition, and that learning to read and write it was to some dialect communities –

those of the border dialects in particular – little short of learning another language. There are also complaints that it makes limited provision for literacy in the dialects. At the surface, one simply deduces that the preference for one dialect against another is the ground for the latter conflict; but implicit in this is dialect loyalty, the feeling one cherishes of one's dialect heritage, a socio-cultural affinity which is imperative to the cultural and linguistic rights of individuals and communities. Since dialects, like languages, are markers of self-image as well as group or community identity, it is possible to feel excluded, dispossessed or alienated when policies or practices tend to offend one's sociolinguistic sensibilities. The diversionary linguistic engineering pertaining largely to the border dialects appears obviously reactionary for this purpose. What we suggest here as a solution is an orthography, christened Democratic or Integrated Orthography, which is sensitive to the individual and collective linguistic and cultural rights of all humans, within which it is possible to resolve these remaining areas of conflicts. It derives from Language Vitality (Ugorji 2003) and is endorsed in Egalitarian Multilingualism (Emenanjo 2002). It is directed towards integration of people, not assimilation; its aim is to ensure that the people may be one even in dialect diversity.

3. The democratic orthography for Igbo

3.1 Basic principles

Thus, in Ugorji (2003), the principles of language vitality which are predicated on the vitality of associated regional varieties are outlined; the concern of the present paper is to show how the tenets of this framework for language vitality may be implemented in Igbo graphisation, as a case in point. More importantly, it is an effort to demonstrate how language or dialect vitality may be implemented as a solution to language or dialect conflicts and orthography controversies, and as a means to implement the democratic demands for sociolinguistic equity enunciated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996), the *Declaration of Rights of Persons Belonging to National, Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (1992), etc., which seek to assert the rights of individuals and communities; and "Community", in this conception, defines a minimum historic commonality of people dwelling in a particular area.

For reasons most probably historic, phonemic alphabets are adopted for African languages; and as Comrie (2005: 568) explains, "[i]n an alphabetic writing system, the basic unit of representation is the phoneme". The current orthography, which is developed as a phonemic orthography along the lines of sound-meaning contrasts, is, in our consideration, narrow, unduly restrictive, unrealistic and hence unproductive. Noting that sound-meaning contrast is at the base of the traditional minimal-pair test, its output is predicted as only those units which are significant to the more structural aspect of language. Understandably, it was constructed within the theoretical framework of the

then dominant Classical and Generative school, to whom the concern of linguistics and language should be with grammar or language structure (see Uwajeh 2002), not with language as a social entity. In the Igbo multi-dialect society, therefore, the abstraction which the current orthography represents fails to relate with the realities of the spoken language which it purports to capture; and constrains documentation to just what it may cope with (see Ugorji 2003 for more details). As shown in Section 3.2 below, the current writing system fails to effectively represent certain words involving the sounds indicated therein, as well as those involving dynamic tones and checked syllables.

Our concern in a democratic orthography is for language as a social phenomenon. Thus, in place of sound-meaning contrast, what we suggest is contrastive social meaning as a basis for characterizing the significant sounds, the candidates for the graphisation which we now suggest to include all properties of speech that bear social meaning, including socio-cultural identity for given dialect communities. In other words, in addition to those sounds which may be contrastive within the traditional minimal pair test, we also have those which in pronunciation enable a listener to identify a speaker as a member of a given historic regional community. This kind of social identification through pronunciation should now be possible in writing when a writer chooses to write his dialect or some other dialect he wishes to identify or be identified with. Moreover, since it is given that a good orthography is one that derives from the spoken language (cf. Williamson 1984), common sense demands that spoken forms of the dialects be thought crucial to a graphisation enterprise. It should also be noted that as a speaker makes a choice among the languages or dialects (including social dialects) he possesses proficiency in, during interaction, so one is free to write (in) any dialect in which he has proficiency. Within this conception, sound-meaning contrast is a basic part of contrastive social meaning. Whereas the former is narrow and restrictive, the latter is holistic, encapsulating sociolinguistic features in addition, which characterize language or dialect as a people's socio-cultural heritage, for which any undue restrictions amount to depriving a people or socio-cultural violence. In other words, the democratic orthography in its principle provides for all phonological (or socio-phonological) features which characterise given dialect communities such that any linguistic materials drawn from them and written may readily be identifiable as a linguistic property of the dialect community from which it is sourced.

This, however, does not require us to devise a completely new orthography for Igbo but to expand the current one, the official (Onwu) orthography, to provide it with a capacity for literacy at dialect community levels, by incorporating into it material of the kind shown in the following section. It is, however, to be noted that what is presented there is conceived as a guide; detailing all dialect-peculiar socio-phonemes may serve to provide further expansion as more dialects are studied; but we reserve this consideration for future research to address.

First, however, a note on the current orthography (the official/Onwu orthography) is thought necessary: as shown in (1) below, the orthography recognises twenty-six consonants and eight vowels.

(1) The Onwu alphabet system

a	b	ch	d	e	f	g	gb	gh
gw	h	i	ị	j	k	kp	kw	l
m	n	ṅ	nw	ny	o	ọ	p	r
sh	t	u	ụ	w	y	z		

Only level tonal contrasts are recognised, high < ´ >, low < ` > and mid < ¯ >. (See *Recommendations of the Igbo Standardization Committee*.)

3.2. The new modifications

The following are therefore considered necessary in the expansion that yields the new integrated orthography, starting with consonantals.

3.2.1. Consonants

– <sw> for the "whistle fricative" in Nsuka, Ikwo and other northern varieties;
– <ph> or <vb> for labial fricatives, /ɸ/ or /β/ in Adazi-Nnukwu, Awka, Ikwo, etc.;
– <ż> or <zh> for /ʒ/, the voiced palatal fricative common in Izii, Orlu, Owere, etc.;
– <ṭ> for the ingressive /t/ in Mbieri, Owere, Mbaise and other dialects;
– <q> for /ʔ/, the glottal stop, in Owere, Mbaise and other dialects;
– <ts> and <dz> for the alveolar affricates in Ikwo, Nsuka, Izii, etc.

3.2.2. Consonantal modifications

– <n> for nasality (written after a consonant) in Ikwere, the central dialects, etc.;
– <h> for aspiration or breathiness (written after a consonant) in Ikwere, Ngwa and the central dialects;
– <w> for labialisation (written after a consonant) in Ohafia, Nsuka etc.

3.2.3. Vowels

– <ẹ> for /ɛ/ in Nsuka, Mbieri, Abo, etc.;
– <ə> and <ə̣>, the schwa, in Nsuka, Ikwo , etc.

3.2.4. Prosodies

– < ˆ > and < ˇ > for Falling and Rising tones, respectively, in Ikwo, Nsuka etc.

3.2.5. Writing rules

Within this conception, formalising writing rules includes permitting consonant clusters and closed syllables as demonstrated elsewhere for Ikwo and other dialects (see Ugorji 2000, 2002), as well as labialisation including <tw>, <dw>, and so on, in Ohafia, Bende, Ikwo, etc., among others.

3.2.6. A sketch of the alphabets of the integrated orthography

a	b	ch	d	e	ẹ	f	g	gb
gh	gw	h	i	ị	j	k	kp	kw
l	m	n	ṅ	nw	ny	o	ọ	p
r	s	sh	t	ṭ	u	ụ	v	w
y	z	ż	ə	ə̣	ts	dz	q	

As already shown, what we have done in devising the orthography system for modern democratized Igbo is simply to expand the current orthography by including symbols which represent the sounds hitherto unrecognized. The schwa, for instance, which occurs predominantly among the northern communities, is assigned two symbols, <ə> and <ə̣>, for harmony; a sub- dotted <ṭ> is added because of its extensive occurrence in and around Owere, the capital city of Imo State, and so on. Also among the Owere communities and their environs exists a preponderance of the glottal stop. We have suggested <q> for this stop. An apostrophe, < ’ >, may be used if <q> is not preferred, as in Hausa, Ogoni, etc.

The grounds for our proposal are further substantiated by the fact that linguistic rights are inalienable rights. The voices of individuals and communities just have to be heard. Their complaints have to be attended to. These lines of considerations and more may now be further expatiated in the following paragraphs.

The new world democracy is an expression of faith in fundamental human rights. *The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (1996) considers linguistic rights as human rights. It includes directing actions towards preserving linguistic diversities so as to permit effective participation of language communities in the new growth model, and fostering sustainable development based on the participation of all and on

respect for the ecological balance of societies and for equitable relationships between all languages and cultures. The present research is about such equity vitally needed among historic regional communities who speak different dialects, and are agitating for sociolinguistic justice. This requires that language policies should show sensitivity to the demands for those procedures which emphasize freedom, equality, accommodation, and enthronement of fundamental human and linguistic rights and the dignity of humans. It has regard for the *Universal Declaration of the Collective Rights of Peoples* (1990), which declared that all peoples have the right to express and develop their culture, language and rules of organization and to this end, to adopt political, educational, communications and governmental structures of their own within different political frameworks.

Accordingly, such policies must also be sensitive to the fact that in a plural polity, all languages are equal, and should therefore make no room for dispossessing any individual or group (Emenanjo 2002). Our concern here is for language communities, defined as any human society established historically in a particular territorial space, whether this space be recognized or not, which identifies itself as a people and has developed a common language as a natural means of communication and cultural cohesion between its members. It is also noted that such rights are individual and collective at one and the same time; and groups include those who are separated from the main body of their community by political or administrative boundaries. The relevant groups, properly defined, include roughly the dialect community types in Igbo ecology. Our proposal targets the preservation of plurilingualism and multiculturism as the norm among human societies. Igbo dialect diversity is therefore one of such resources, like biodiversity, that should be preserved; hence this study.

Our suggestion is also in consideration of ideological leanings which are directed towards reduction of inequalities in access to literacy and education, as part of social justice. Thus, for those members of society who have little or no access to education, acquiring facility in their own language or dialect of earliest socialisation (Elugbe 1990; Oyelaran 1990), there is hope for a part towards reduction of inequalities in both linguistic and sociocultural values, enhancement of pride in one's dialect as a linguistic heritage and self-esteem among individuals in dialect communities. None should be excluded, none deprived, dominated or dispossessed, whether as individuals or communities.

In this way, the standard dialect remains graphised; and the other regional dialects are also provided with a capacity for literacy (cf. Crowley 1968; Mmadike 2000). It is hoped that this will make the hitherto inaccessible wealth of wisdom and poetic subtleties from dialect communities available and preservable, and the standard variety which has been the educated variety becomes further enriched thereby. Domains for dialects are assumed to be fairly naturally defined. Details regarding the assignment of domains are shown elsewhere (Ugorji 2003).

4. Conclusion

The age-long controversies surrounding Igbo orthography indicate that justice is yet expected to be done. This study suggests the path to this justice by introducing a democratic and integrated orthography. Although the introduction of the official (Onwu) orthography seems to have taken care of the political interests of the early churches from where the earliest controversies which did Igbo language development a great disservice arose, two more formidable dimensions are yet to be tracked. They are the linguistic and the sociological or sociopolitical dimensions. Whereas in the sociological dimension, the concern is for the socio-cultural values that constitute a people's God-given heritage, the linguistic dimension is about the development or otherwise of the corpus of dialect resource and for the association of the said resource with appropriate use domain and for literacy. Our solution is to demand that all dialects should be vitalized; and we have demonstrated how this is achievable. To implement our democratic option for Igbo, what is considered crucial is an expansion of the current orthography to include in principle all features which constitute consistently delineable socio-phonological properties of given dialect communities. There is hope to resolve all the controversies and conflicts in their dimensions if the project is accepted. It introduces the needed justice. Thus, it is hoped that adopting this approach is all that is required to resolve the dialect conflict in Igbo and indeed any other, such as the Yoruba one-dialect based orthography, among others. The approach appears more convincing, as it directs efforts towards fulfilling the new world demands for the respect of the linguistic and cultural rights of individuals and communities. Our democratic orthography is putatively the solution we have hoped for to resolve controversies or conflicts among dialect communities and language groups all over the world.

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