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# **Edo Orthography Revisited**

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Reprinted from:

*Four Decades in the Study of Languages & Linguistics in Nigeria: A  
Festschrift for Kay Williamson*

Edited by

**Ozo-mekuri Ndimele**

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Published by:

**National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba**

## 28 Edo Orthography Revisited

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The present work highlights some of the inconsistencies and the ambiguity in the Edo orthography with particular reference to the nasal consonants. Relying on phonetic evidence, it is pointed out that the Edo orthography failed to provide a distinct way of writing the different nasal consonants in a consistent manner.

It is suggested that the palatal [ɲ] and the labial-velar [ɲw] nasal consonants, which currently have no distinct orthographic symbols in the language, be written using the digraphs 'ny' and 'nw' respectively, as indeed was the case in Melzian (1932), as is also the practice in some neighbouring languages, such as Igbo following Williamson (1984:10) on orthographic harmonization.

It is further suggested that since Edo nasal consonants fall into a natural class characterized by predictable nasal spread on a following vowel, the orthographic symbol 'n' should not be written after such a vowel. Thus, the current practice of writing 'n' after the vowel that follows the labio-dental nasal consonant [ɱ] appears inconsistent with the way the bilabial and the alveolar nasals are orthographically represented without the 'n'.

### 1.0 Introduction

It is pointed out in Bamgbose (1965:1) that "... a good orthography should represent all and only the significant sounds in the language." Relying on this statement, it is highly doubtful if the Edo orthography, as it currently is, can qualify for this definition with particular reference to the palatal [ɲ] and labial-velar [ɲw] nasal consonants, that have not been appropriately represented orthographically.

It is known that the spoken form of a language exists before its written form. Thus, the spoken language usually serves as a guide to the written language. It is pointed out in Williamson (1984:1) that "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", according to her, "we should be able to read the language just as easily as we can understand people speaking it." This, therefore, implies that for every phonetic sound in a language, there must be a corresponding orthographic symbol.

The Edo orthographic system, like those of some other Nigerian languages, is based on the ordinary letters of the Latin alphabet.

### 1.1 The Edo orthographic system

The Edo language was first written by the early Colonial Administrators and Missionaries. One of the first documented pieces of evidence is the Edo translation of the Gospel according to St. Mark, and Premiers and Catechism books written for schools and churches published by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Press in 1914. The orthographic system of the language consists of twenty-two (20) letters of the Latin alphabet: *i, e, a, u, o* phonetically [i], [e], [a], [u], [o] respectively for five out of the seven oral vowels; *p, b, f, v, t, d, s, z, r, l, k, g, w, y, and h*, (phonetically [p], [b], [f], [v], [t], [d], [s], [z], [r], [l], [k], [g], [w], [j] and [h] respectively) for fifteen out of the twenty-two oral consonants.

Two of the seven oral vowels, [ɛ] and [ɔ] are represented orthographically as 'e' and 'o' respectively, i.e., the use of sub-dots with the corresponding letters representing the half-close vowels. Digraphs were used in the orthographic rendering of the five Edo nasal vowels. Thus, the combination of the letter for an oral vowel and the letter *n* is the orthographic form of the nasal vowel corresponding to the oral vowel. In other words, the nasal vowels [ĩ], [ẽ], [ã], [ũ], [õ], in Edo are written *in*, *en*, *an*, *un* and *on* respectively as evidenced in the written forms of the words *ihin* [ihi] "catarrh", *eken* [èkẽ] "sand", *igan* [ìgã] "feather", *ekun* [èkũ] "waist", and *ukpõn* [ùkpõ] . Similarly, double vowels are used orthographically to represent vowels with a rising tone. Thus, the Edo word for "fall" [dè] is written *de* whereas the word for "tie" [dě] is written *dee*.

The use of digraphs has also been adopted for seven out of the twenty-two oral consonants: *vb*, *rr*, *rh*, *kh*, *gh*, *kp*, and *gb*, phonetically [β], [r], [r], [x], [ɣ], [kp], and [gb] as in the written forms of the words *ovbe* [òβé] "sleep", *erre* [èré] "enemy", *erhe* [èrè] "groin", *akha* [àxà] "sparrow", *igho* [íyó] "money", *ukpo* [ùkpó] "year" and *ugbo* [úgbó] "farm" respectively. It is pertinent to note that the use of the digraph *rr* for the alveolar trill [r] was the result of the 1974 seminar on the reform of the Edo orthography organized by the then Mid-West State Government. The purpose was to distinguish [r] from [ɾ] both of which were formerly written as a single *r*.

The letters *m* and *n* are used to represent the nasal sounds [m] and [n] as in the written forms of the words *ema* [èmã] "drum", and *eni* [èní] "elephant". The Tables below show the Edo sounds and their corresponding orthographic symbols:

Table I: Edo vowel sounds and their corresponding orthographic symbols

Sounds	[ĩ]	[ẽ]	[ɛ]	[a]	[u]	[o]	[ɔ]	[ĩ]	[ẽ]	[ã]	[ũ]	[õ]
Grapheme(s)	i	e	e	a	u	o	o	in	en	an	un	on

Table II: Edo oral consonants (stops) and their corresponding orthographic symbols:

Sounds	[p]	[b]	[t]	[d]	[k]	[g]	[kp]	[gb]
Grapheme(s)	p	b	t	d	k	g	kp	gb

Table III: Edo fricatives, rhotics, and their corresponding orthographic symbols

Sounds	[f]	[v]	[s]	[z]	[r]	[r]	[x]	[ɣ]	[h]
Grapheme(s)	f	v	s	z	rr	rh	kh	gh	h

Table IV: Edo approximants, laterals, and their corresponding orthographic symbols

Sounds	[β]	[ɾ]	[l]	[j]	[w]
Grapheme(s)	vb	r	l	y	w

Table V: Edo nasal consonants and their corresponding orthographic symbols

Sounds	[m]	[ɱ]	[n]	[ɲ]	[ŋw]
Grapheme(s)	m	mw	n	-	-

It could be seen from Table V above that the palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants have no corresponding orthographic symbols in the current Edo orthography. Moreover, there have been some inconsistencies in the orthographic

representation of the Edo labio-dental nasal consonant [ɱ]: the redundant orthographic representation of 'n' after the vowel immediately following the labio-dental nasal [ɱ] written with the digraph 'mw' (cf. Osemwegie 1965, Egharevba 1972, Osemwegie 1974, Imasuen 1997, Obazee 1997; 'mw' written without the redundant n after the vowel (cf. Emovon and Osemwegie 1982, Erhahon 1998, etc). It is not uncommon to find a mix up of these two ways of representing the labio-dental nasal consonant in the text of a given Author (cf. Osemwegie 1965, Osemwegie 1974, Emovon and Osemwegie 1982, etc.). As pointed out earlier, the sequence *Vn* is the orthographic rendering of the nasal vowel corresponding to the oral *V*. This would imply that the proponents of this orthographic "reform" didn't seem to acknowledge phonetic and phonological realities of the labio-dental, palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants in Edo.

In the "missionary orthography", the digraphs 'mw', 'ny', and 'nw' were used to represent the labio-dental, the palatal, and the labial-velar nasal consonants (cf. also Melzian 1937 for the last two sounds) without the redundant n after the vowel following these consonants. Thus, the Edo words [èɱjĩ] "something", [ɪɲã] "yam" and [èɲwẽ] "breast", for instance, were appropriately written *emwi*, *inya*, and *enwẹ* respectively. For some unexplained reasons (other than what Melzian 1937: xii claimed to be "following Yoruba tradition"), 'ny' and 'mw' were dropped, and the Edo phonetically/phonologically significant nasal consonants, [ɲ] and [ɲw] were therefore assumed to be derived by a rule of regressive nasal assimilation of [j], and [w] before the nasal vowel written orthographically as the sequence *Vn*: "By 1940, the digraphs 'nw' and 'ny' were dropped out of the alphabet" since "it was recognized that nw is derived from w before the nasalized vowels of /an/on/in/un/ while ny is derived from y" (Osemwegie 1992). A clear mixed up of orthography with phonetic analysis is evident in the above statement. Consequently, the Edo words [ɪɲã] "yam" and [èɲwẽ] "breast", for instance, are now written *iyān*, and *ewen* respectively. This probably explains why, for instance, Amayo and Elugbe (1982) even went as far as proposing the replacement of the digraphs 'mw' by 'vb'. Thus, words like *emwẹ* "trouble", having the labio-dental nasal consonant transcribed by these authors as [ɛβɛ] with an intervocalic bilabial oral approximant were written with the digraph 'vb' corresponding to that oral consonant, as in the case of *evbɛn*. It is pertinent to note that the nasalized palatal and labial-velar glides derived from the regressive assimilation of the oral glides [j] and [w] by a following nasal vowel in Yoruba are not phonetically similar (with regard to force of articulation) to the inherent palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants in Edo. Consider the following examples from Yoruba:

1. *Iyan* / ɪjã / => [ɪjã] "pounded Yam"
2. *Ayan* / ɔjã / => [ɔjã] "Talking drum"
3. *Eyin* / ejĩ / => [ejĩ] "back"
4. *Awon* / awõ / => [awõ] "they"
5. *Owon* / owõ / => [owõ] "expensive"

Rather, the Edo palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants are similar in force of articulation to these nasal consonants in the following Igbo words:

6. *Enyi* / éɲĩ / => [éɲĩ] "elephant"

7. Onya / ɔ̃pà / ⇒ [ ɔ̃pǎ ] “trap”  
 in the case of the palatal nasal consonant, and  
 8. Enwe / è̃ɲwè / ⇒ [ è̃ɲwě ] “monkey”  
 9. Onwa / ɔ̃ɲwá / ⇒ [ ɔ̃ɲwǎ ] “moon”  
 10. Anwuru / á̃ɲwòrò / ⇒ [ á̃ɲwòrǒ ] “smoke”  
 in the case of the labial-velar nasal consonant.

Moreover, phonemic analysis and experimental studies by Omozuwa (1987; 1990) support the claim in the present study that [ɲ], [ɲ], and [ɲw] like [m] and [n] are inherent nasal consonants in Edo. They are not derived by any rule of regressive nasal assimilation. They should, therefore, be appropriately represented orthographically like ‘m’ and ‘n’ without the redundant *n* written after the vowel which follows a nasal consonant, i.e., ‘mw’, ‘ny’, ‘nw’ respectively followed by a vowel.

## 1.2 Edo nasal consonants as a natural class

It is argued in the present study that since the Edo nasal consonants constitute a natural class by virtue of their phonetic and phonological behaviour, each consonant should have an orthographic symbol to represent it. As it currently is, provision is made only for the bilabial and the alveolar nasal consonants [m] and [n] in the orthographic system: ‘m’ and ‘n’ respectively. Even though the digraph ‘mw’ has been used to represent the labio-dental nasal consonant [ɲ], the presence of the grapheme ‘n’ after the oral vowel that immediately follows the digraph makes it inconsistent with the way ‘m’ and ‘n’ are orthographically represented i.e., without an ‘n’ after the vowel immediately following these consonants. The absence of separate orthographic symbols for the palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants [ɲ] and [ɲw] respectively in the system appears to violate the principle of a good orthography which requires that “... all and only the significant sounds in the language” should be orthographically represented. (Bamgbose 1965:1)

### 1.2.1 Phonetic and phonological evidence

A sound exists in a language only when the native speakers of such language acknowledge its existence. This, they do by being able to pronounce such sound in isolation. The phonetic reality of the five Edo nasal consonants [m, ɲ, n, ɲ, and ɲw] is not at all in doubt. This is evidenced in the fact that an average Edo speaker is always able to pronounce each of the nasal consonants in a “phonetic spelling” of the word(s) in which they occur. In Edo, consonants are co-articulated with the vowel [i] when pronounced in isolation. Thus, [p] is pronounced [ pí ] similar to the English letter *p*, [s] is pronounced [ sí ] much like the English words “see” or “sea”, [m] is pronounced [ mí ] similar to the English word “me”, etc. The Edo words for “drum”, “here”, “elephant”, “yam”, “honey” are, therefore, phonetically spelt: “è mǐ ǎ” [ èmǎ ]; “è ɲǐ ǎ” [ èɲǎ ]; “è nǐ ǐ” [ ènǐ ]; “í ɲǐ ǎ” [ íɲǎ ]; “ò ɲwǐ ǐ” [ óɲwǐ ] respectively. The redundant (predictable) nasalization of the vowel co-articulated with a nasal consonant in the language can be observed in all cases. This, indeed, is one of the major characteristics of nasal consonants as a natural class in Edo: all vowels are redundantly nasalized when immediately preceded by a nasal consonant (for experimental evidence, cf. Omozuwa 1990).

From the functional point of view, the five Edo nasal consonants, as a natural class, contrast in identical environment, as we see below:

11. / mǎ / ⇒ [ mǎ ] “be good”

12. / mǎ / => [ mǎ̃ ] “measure”  
 13. / nǎ / => [ nǎ̃ ] “scandalize”  
 14. / jǎ / => [ jǎ̃ ] “own”  
 15. / ɲwǎ / => [ ɲwǎ̃ ] “grow (up)”

Within this framework, therefore, each of these consonants is classified as separate phoneme.

### 1.2.2 Evidence from vowel elision

Morphologically, Edo nouns begin and end in a vowel. Whereas the last vowel of an Edo noun can be either an oral or a nasal vowel, the first vowel is redundantly oral. It is pointed out in Omozuwa (1992; 1997) that in a (V)CV # VCVCV(CV...) collocation, the last Vowel V of the first word is always deleted provided it is not a high vowel in which case glide formation results. Thus, as a natural class, the five Edo nasal consonants predictably spread nasality to the first vowel of the second word of a (V)CV # VCVCV(CV...) collocation (which otherwise is always oral) after the deletion of the last vowel of the first word. Consider the following examples:

- |                             |                             |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 16. / ɛmǎ # (ɔ̃)é ɔ̃bó /    | => [ ɛmǎ̃!bó ] (2)          |
| “drum” (of) “native doctor” | “a native doctor’s drum”    |
| 17. / ómí # ɔ̃gbǎ /         | => [ ómjǔgbǎ̃ ]             |
| “white yam” “thirty”        | “thirty white yams”         |
| 18. / mù # ihé /            | => [ mwihé ]                |
| “carry” “load”              | “carry load”                |
| 19. / mù # ágá /            | => [ mwǎgá ]                |
| “Carry” “chair”             | “carry chair”               |
| 20. / ɔ̃mǎ # ɔ̃yɔ̃ /        | => [ ɔ̃mjǔyɔ̃̃ ]            |
| “person” “respect”          | “a respectful person”       |
| 21. / ɛmǐ # ɔ̃kpá /         | => [ ɛmjǔkpá̃ ]             |
| “something” “one”           | “something”                 |
| 22. / ɛní # ùgǐé /          | => [ ɛnjǔ!gǐé ]             |
| “elephant” “twenty”         | “twenty elephants”          |
| 23. / únjé # ɔ̃mǎ /         | => [ únjǔ!mǎ̃ ]             |
| “lineage” “person”          | “one’s lineage”             |
| 24. / nǎ # ɪnè /            | => [ nǎ̃jé ]                |
| “say” “news”                | “gossip”                    |
| 25. / nì # íyó /            | => [ nǎ̃yó ]                |
| “contribute” “money”        | “contribute money”          |
| 26. / ɛnjé # àsɔ̃ /         | => [ ɛnǎ̃!sɔ̃̃ ]            |
| “snake” “night”             | “unpredictable person”      |
| 27. / ɪpǎ # ɔ̃rò /          | => [ ɪpǎ̃!rò̃ ]             |
| “yam” “new”                 | “new yam”                   |
| 28. / jǎ # àkɔ̃ /           | => [ jǎ̃kɔ̃̃ ]              |
| “open” “teeth”              | “open (your) teeth”         |
| 29. / jì # òwè /            | => [ jǔowè̃ ]               |
| “throw” “leg”               | “throw (your) legs (apart)” |
| 30. / ɛɲwé # émilà /        | => [ ɛɲwé̃milà̃ ]           |
| “milk” “cow”                | “(cow) milk”                |



31. / ò # ñwò # àmè / => [ òñwámě ]  
 "he/She" "drink" "water" "He/She drinks water"  
 32. / ñwò # àpò / => [ ñwàpò ]  
 "drink" "water" "drink water"

The following progressive nasal assimilation rule accounts for the observed phenomenon:

$$\begin{bmatrix} +\text{syll} \\ -\text{nas} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} +\text{syll} \\ +\text{nas} \end{bmatrix} / \begin{bmatrix} -\text{syll} \\ +\text{nas} \end{bmatrix} \text{ —————}$$

### 1.3. Conclusion

It is established in the present study that Edo language has five phonemically significant nasal consonants /m, ɱ, n, ɲ, and ñw/. These nasal consonants constitute a natural class since they redundantly nasalize a following oral vowel. In the current Edo orthography, [m] is written 'm'; [n] is written 'n'; and [ɱ] is written 'mw'. However, an inconsistency exists in the way the fact of redundant nasality of a vowel following a nasal consonant is orthographically represented: an oral vowel is written immediately after 'm' and 'n' whereas after 'mw', an oral vowel plus 'n' is written, i. e., *Vn*. This creates an ambiguity since the digraph *Vn* phonetically represents an inherent nasal vowel in the language. The same argument also holds in the case of the palatal and labial-velar nasal consonants. As pointed out in this study, there are currently no orthographic symbols for these consonants in the language. For the purpose of harmonization with the orthographic systems of some neighbouring languages with regard to these sounds, it is recommended that the "missionary" practice of representing these two sounds orthographically by the digraphs 'ny' and 'nw' respectively be adopted. It is therefore suggested that earlier practice whereby the orthographic symbol for an oral vowel is written after each of the nasal consonants 'm', 'mw', 'n', 'ny', and 'nw' be adopted in Edo orthography.

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