

## De- Mystifying the Spelling of the Exclamation “Wow!”

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### ABSTRACT

“Wow!” is a lexical entry in the English Language Inventory. It is used to express surprise in the event of a hearer’s fresh reception of pleasant or exhilarating, and unpleasant information. However, it was observed that contrary to its grapheme representation in Dictionaries and other orthographical authorities, varying spelling patterns are used among staff and students of the University of Calabar. This paper has investigated the different spelling forms of this exclamation and offers some explanations for the diverse spelling patterns of this word. Data have been collected from staff and students of the faculties of Arts, Education, Social Sciences, Law, Management Sciences and Clinical Sciences, after which analysis were carried out using the calculated mean score and Standard Deviation, to authenticate the results. Interviews were also conducted on a select number of the population under study. This study shows the extent the use of indigenous languages bring about a change in the orthography of English, especially on exclamations and attempts to locate the spelling of this word within the mosaic of Nigerian English. It brings the attention of the reading public to these spelling forms as being varied, rather than wrongly spelt.

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### Introduction

The Macmillan English Dictionary (2007) defines “wow” as an interjection used informally to show that one is very surprised or impressed by something. It is used as a noun, where someone or something is very impressive, or as a verb to impress someone, by doing something extremely well. The usages of the word “wow” will therefore include:

- (a) Wow! That is unbelievable!, that a PDP controlled parliament could think of impeaching President Jonathan
- (b) They wowed their audience by their performance of calisthenics.
- (c) That woman’s dress is wow!

“Wow” can also be said to be a form of exclamation, that is, something that one says suddenly and loudly, out of feelings of surprise, anger and being impressed, among others. Spellings on the other hand, can be seen as one of the elements of orthography, and prescriptive element of alphabetic languages. It is the writing of one or more words with letters and diacritics, (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia). Therefore, the spelling of words follow prescriptive guidelines outside which a word would be seen as wrongly spelt by virtue of its alphabetic presentation.

In general terms, to “de-mystify” entails making clarifications, and attempting to create logical understanding of a phenomenon or issue, which is rather incomprehensible. It means taking a matter which is shrouded in mystery and causing it to be understood in a more common place manner. In relation to this research, efforts are made to unravel the mystery behind the varying spelling forms obtained as data, and conclusions are drawn on the possible reasons for such variation.

A grapheme is a letter of an alphabet and all the letters which represent a phoneme, for instance f, ph and gh for the phoneme /f/ (The American Heritage Dictionary 2000). It is also the minimal unit of a writing system, a unit which consists of all the written symbols or sequences of written symbols that are used to

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represent a single phoneme (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary 2010). When the orthography of a language is developed, attempts are made to assign graphemes to sounds within the speech inventory in order to attain some uniformity within the written form.

### **English Language and Tertiary Education in Nigeria**

Banjo (1996:61) notes that English Language is spoken by about 600 million people in the world, though only half of that number speaks it as their mother tongue. He further says that for the 300 million people for whom English is not their mother tongue, some of them speak it as a second language, and the rest as a foreign language.

In Nigeria, English language is a lingua franca and the agencies through which it gained entrance into the Nigerian territory are commerce, religion and education. The entry points of this language into Nigeria are Bonny, Calabar, Badagry and Abeokuta. English language has developed in Nigeria in ways which Banjo (1996), Categorizes as follows:

1. The Education system: This means that it has been taught as a subject and in many cases used as a medium of instruction in regions where languages, other than English were the main languages.
2. Where a native variety of English was not the language spoken by most of the population.
3. Where it is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it in the region where it is used. This means that it is used for some purposes such as letter writing, literature, on the floor of parliament, communication between the government and the people, media and publishing and sometimes for spoken communication between friends, and within the family,
4. Where it is 'localized' or "nativized" by adopting some language features of its own such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structures, words, expressions and so on.

Today, English is the language of wider communication and takes position as the proto form of Nigerian Pidgin, the latter which has developed into variants traceable to regions and geographical locations. As a subject, students are required to obtain a credit grade to gain admission into any tertiary institution of their choice. In the University, they are taught in English, except within the departments which solely carry out studies in other languages. These students are required to present their research papers (oral and written), and pass examinations written in the language. This, it is believed should provide them with a good knowledge of how English language is spoken and written and how individual words of the language are spelt.

### **Sound-to-Spelling Correspondence in English**

English spellings are believed by many to be chaotic. This problem also exists among speakers of English in Nigeria, hence the necessity to explain another instance of this complexity which is not common to non-native speakers alone. Finegan (2008) shows the ways and wherefores of sound/spelling discrepancies between pronunciations and written representations for many words as follows:

1. Written English has diverse origins with different spelling conventions.
2. A spelling system established several hundred years ago is still being used to represent a language that continues to change in its spoken form.
3. English is spoken differently around the world (and in different regions of a nation), despite relatively uniform standards for spellings such spellings uniformly facilitate international communication, but it also increases the disparity between the way English is written and spoken.
4. A given word part may be pronounced differently, depending on its adjacent sounds and stress patterns.
5. Spoken forms may differ across social situations, and the writing system incorporates some degree of variation.

From the submission of Banjo and Finegan, it can be seen that there are different explanations for discrepancies in English spelling, some of which culture plays a role in. This is stated by William Labov in Jones (1998), who says that "it is the goal... to acquire full control of the standard language without giving

up their culture". This means that indigenous culture influences the way people use English Language, including the manner the spelling of words in the language are undertaken.

### **The Principle of Accuracy**

Williamson (2006:7) enumerates the principles of a good orthography as accuracy, consistency, convenience, harmonization and familiarity. Anyanwu (2009) adopts these principles as well, but considers accuracy and consistency as the two most important principles of a good orthography. This study takes up the principle of accuracy and uses it to explain the occurrence of the diverse spellings extracted from the data obtained. This principle is useful because the exclamation "wow" appears in informal speech. This is because accuracy entails the aligning of a sound to its grapheme, that is, a sound to a letter or alphabet which represents it graphically. More so, this is a word that is not written down regularly.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted on 150 persons. Data were elicited from 96 females and 54 males who are staff and students of the faculties of Arts, Education, Social Sciences, Law, Management and Clinical Sciences. The students were requested to write the exclamation "wow!" after being told a story which ended on a note that warrants the use of this exclamation (please see the appendix). This exercise took place during one of their semester examinations and their various responses were submitted alongside their answer scripts. Subsequently, an analysis of the data collected was carried out using the calculated mean score and standard Deviation to authenticate the results.

Twenty academic staff were also requested to spell the exclamation "wow" and interviews were conducted on them afterwards. Questions asked targeted the underlying influence of their individual spellings, which mostly differed from each other. It should be noted that the academic staff who formed part of the population under study showed sceptism as to whether they got the spelling right. It is also believed, that the students who provided some of the data for this research took this exercise seriously, since they submitted their spellings with their examination answer booklets. This is attributed to the fact that they were not informed that their spellings of the word would not be assessed alongside scripts. Additionally, examination situations are generally taken seriously by the students who it is believed did their best to provide the correct spelling of the word "wow!". The students are undergraduates of ages ranging between 18 and 27. The Academic staff are First Degree, Masters and Doctor of Philosophy holders spread across the target faculties.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**Table 1: Varieties of the spelling and their distribution**

	Exclamation	Number of Respondents	Male	% male	Female	% female
1.	WAO	15	8	5.33	7	4.66
2.	WA:HOO	1	-	ϕ	1	0.69
3.	WAHO	3	1	0.67	2	1.33
4.	WAOO	2	1	0.67	1	0.67
5.	WOW	58	16	10.66	42	28
6.	WAHOO	4	2	1.33	2	1.33
7.	WAOA	2	-	ϕ	2	1.33
8.	WAH!OO	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
9.	WAH-O	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
10.	WOAH	6	2	1.33	4	2.70
11.	WHAO	11	3	2.30	8	5.33
12.	WAOH	15	8	5.33	7	4.66
13.	WOW-OH	2	1	0.67	1	0.67
14.	WHAOO	3	2	1.33	1	0.67
15.	WAOW	5	2	1.33	3	2.0
16.	WOOH	1	1	0.67	-	ϕ
17.	WOOW	2	1	0.67	1	0.67
18.	WOW!!!OH	3	-	ϕ	3	2.0
19.	WAHOHO	2	-	ϕ	1	0.67
20.	WAOHOOOO	1	-	ϕ	2	1.33
21.	WAOOO	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
22.	WAW	2	1	0.67	1	0.67
23.	WAOOW	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
24.	WOAW	1	1	0.67	-	ϕ
25.	WA-O	1	1	0.67	-	ϕ
26.	WAHO	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
27.	WAOOOH	1	1	0.67		ϕ
28.	WAO-OH	3	2	1.33		0.67
29.	WAOU	1	-	ϕ	1	0.67
	TOTAL	150	54	36.0%	96	64.0%

**The Mean Score**

The mean score is arrived at by dividing the total number of respondents by the number of variants of the exclamation.

$$150 = \text{Total Number of respondents}$$

$$29 = \text{Number of variants}$$

$$150 \div 29$$

Equation (i):

$$= \frac{Ex}{n}$$

$$= \frac{150}{29}$$

$$= 5.2$$

**The Standard Deviation**

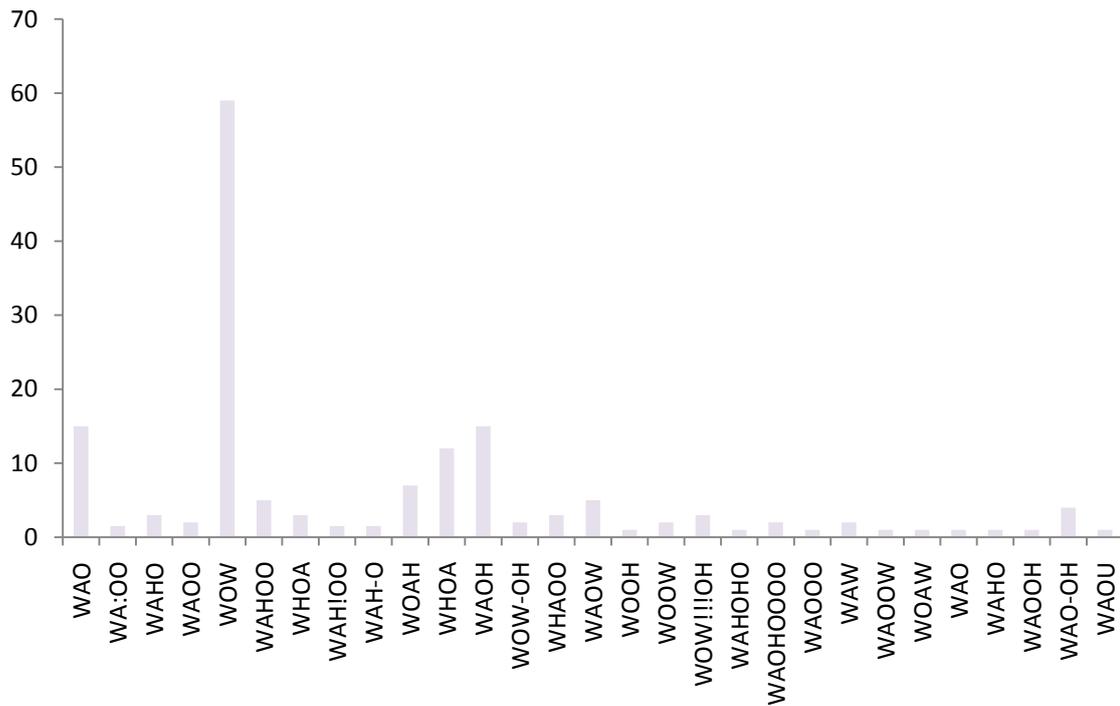
Equation (ii):

$$\begin{aligned}
 SD &= \sqrt{\frac{\sum (x - \bar{x})^2}{n}} \\
 &= \sqrt{\frac{\sum (150 - 5.2)^2}{29}} \\
 &= \sqrt{\frac{(150 - 5.2)^2}{29}} \\
 &= \sqrt{\frac{(144.8)^2}{29}} \\
 &= \sqrt{\frac{20967.04^2}{29}} \\
 &= \sqrt{723}
 \end{aligned}$$

$$SD = 26.9$$

From the calculation above, the mean score is 5.2 and the standard Deviation is 26.9.

**Presentation of Data using a Bar Chart**



### Discussion of Findings

From the bar chart plotted above, the spelling of the exclamation as WOW occurred the highest (52%), followed by WAO and WAOH (15%) each. Others are WHAO (11%), WOAHO (6%), WAOOW (5%), WAHOO (4%) and WAHO, WHAHO, WOW!!! OH and WAO-OH (2%) each. These are followed by WAOO, WHOA, WOW -OH, WOOW, WAOHOOO, WAW (2%) and lastly by WA: HOO, WAH: OO, WAH-O, WOOW, WAHOHO, WAOOO, WAOOW, WOAW, WA-O, WAHO, WAOOOH and WAOU (1%). The numbers of brackets indicate the number of respondents who spelt each variant of the exclamation.

The interview conducted provides possible reasons for the diverse spellings of "wow". 5 (five) out of 20 (twenty) respondents in this category spelt this word as it is listed in the English Dictionary, and 15 (Fifteen) wrote out varied forms of the word on the papers which were handed out to them. On the whole the following explanations were given by this latter group.

1. That is the way they utter it. Particularly, one of the respondents expressed that "wow" to him looked like the grapheme representation of the barking of a dog and did not convey the articulation of the sounds which constitute the exclamation made as a result of being impressed, surprised or exhilarated.
2. That the exclamation is not indigenous to English, and the spelling of the word with a final "o" reflects what is obtainable in indigenous languages such as "e woo!" in Igbo or "woyo!" in Efik.
3. That their spellings convey the way they feel when they receive information, and its consequent response.
4. That it is the way they have always spelt the exclamation, maintaining that "wow" is onomatopoeic in nature.
5. That they are aware of the prescribed spelling of the exclamation, but decided to spell it differently.

The information extracted from the data gathered, give rise to these submissions.

- (a) The population studied do not use the exclamation frequently in writing. It appears mostly in their spoken utterances. This leads to their inability to present the word graphically as the orthography of the language requires. Memorization which is one of the ways of knowing how to spell a word hardly takes place because it does not appear in written form, (Bradley 1983 in theories of sound - to- spelling correspondence).
- (b) Indigenous languages interact phonologically with the sounds of English in the spelling of this English interjection. Though the word is etymologically English, it is nativized and written with letters which represent the sounds in the indigenous languages, including Nigerian Pidgin. Worthy of note is the expression "na wa o!" in Nigerian Pidgin, which is used as an interjection to express dismay.
- (c) For non-native speakers of English, not being exposed to the written form of the word "wow" translates to not being able to spell it at all. Nevertheless, where necessary, attempts are made to assign graphemes to sounds as they are perceived by the hearer, hence, the varied spellings as provided by the sample population.
- (d) English spellings have already been viewed as chaotic. The correspondences between spelling and pronunciation are highly complex, (Orthography- wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Where speakers assign graphemes to sounds, the experience of this complexity can give rise to diverse spelling forms.
- (e) The nature of the information received by the hearer can impact on the exclamation uttered and subsequent spelling of the word. Therefore, extreme or complete surprise could mean increasing the number of the letter 'O' to express that feeling, and vice versa. For instance, an expression of "Waooo" could mean being extremely surprised.

### Summary and Conclusion

This paper has examined the different spelling patterns of the exclamation "wow", and attempted to provide explanations for the variants of this word, which were collected as data. The population which was studied consists of undergraduate students and academic staff of six faculties from the main campus and library area (the two major sections) of University of Calabar.

A total of 29 grapheme forms were found to be used by the population studied. Further analysis reveals that out of 150 respondents, 58%, spelt the word "wow" as it is prescribed by the English Dictionary. The remaining 42% spelt the word in 28 (twenty eight) different ways. It can be concluded that a speaker's lack of memorization leads to his or her inability to spell the word correctly. This is because this exclamation is used mostly in informal speech.

It is also our position that among other things, the phonological interaction of the indigenous languages of non-native speakers with English Language plays a role in their spelling of what they perceive to be "wow". This is coupled with the generally complex and chaotic nature of sound-to-spelling correspondence which English Language is believed to have.

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