

Teaching Nigerian Languages: *Experiences from the Delta*



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LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: THE IBIBIO EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of language development, especially in Nigeria, has, in recent times, been the subject of discussion in linguistic circles. This is more so because the teaching of Nigerian languages is a Federal Government Policy and is enshrined in the National Policy on Education. According to the policy, a child shall be educated in and through his mother tongue, or the language of the immediate community at least up to the Junior Secondary.

The new emphasis placed on education in the mother tongue by the Federal Government seems to have led to an awakening of the importance of Nigerian languages and their place in the educational system. Consequently, Nigerians (linguists and non-linguists alike), have taken up the challenge to develop their languages in order to ensure that they (the languages) are not left out in the scheme of things.

The present paper focuses on the history of the development of the Ibibio language as well as the problems of, and prospects for further development.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE IBIBIO LANGUAGE

To the British administrators and missionaries who worked in the south-eastern part of Nigeria during the colonial era, Efik, Oron, Eket, Ibuno, Efiat, Okobo, Annang, Andoni and Ibibio belong to one language and ethnic group, as their so-called languages are mutually intelligible. These "languages" were all regarded as dialects of Ibibio. In this paper, Ibibio refers to the mother tongue of about six million people in twelve Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State. The Local Government Areas

include Uyo, Uruan, Itu, Iko Abasi, Nsit Ubium, Ikono, Etinan, Onna, Eket, Uquo-Ibuno and Ekpe Attai. Ibibio is also spoken by more than one million people in Cross River State (Essien 1990:ix). According to the latest classification (Williamson 1989) of African Languages, Ibibio belongs to the lower group of the Benue - Congo sub-family of the Niger-Congo.

The attempt to reduce the Ibibio language to writing dates back to the 19th century, about the time the Efik language was written (Essien, *Ibid*: x). History has it that the first missionaries to the south-eastern part of Nigeria came on the invitation of the Efik people. Consequently they concentrated on the study of the Efik language, with the result that Efik was imposed as the language of the south-eastern part of Nigeria. But, as far back as the 1930's, M.D.W. Jeffreys, a one-time British District Officer of Nigeria produced an orthography for the Ibibio language, and pleaded with the authorities that Ibibio be used officially side by side with Efik for the benefit of the Ibibio people who far outnumbered (and still outnumber) the Efiks. Jeffrey's plea was rejected, and so his orthography was never put to use.

As a result, the Ibibio language was not given official recognition until 1983, when the Ibibio people themselves decided to take the bull by the horns by producing the orthography of their language. Ibibio is therefore the first language to have been written by the people themselves.

It is important to note, however, that a few published materials on Ibibio existed before the publication of the orthography in 1983. Notable among them are M.D.W. Jeffreys' Old Calabar and Notes on the Ibibio Language (1935), Donald C. Simmons' article entitled "Ibibio very Morphology" in African Studies No. 16 (1957). In 1968, Elaine M. Kaufman, wrote a Ph.D dissertation entitled Ibibio Grammar, for the University of California at Berkeley. Seven years later, in 1975 the Ohio University Working Papers in Linguistics published Sara Garne's Acoustic Analysis of Double Articulation in Ibibio" in its Twentieth Volume. Still in 1975, W.E. Boys wrote another Ph.D dissertation entitled Ibibio Phonology at Ohio State University. In 1979, "Length and Nasalization in Ibibio" written by Okon Essien, was published in Work in Progress, 12, University of Edinburgh.

It was not until the 1980's that Ibibio scholars started making remarkable

contributions to the Ibibio language and culture. In 1981 and 1982, Okon Essien published two articles entitled "The Problems of Teaching African Languages: The Ibibio Dimension", in the Nigerian Language Teacher, Vol.4, No.2 and "The so-called Reflexive Pronouns and Reflexization in Ibibio", in Studies in African Linguistics, Vol.13, No.2 respectively. Still in 1982, Paico Press and Books Ltd., Calabar published A.J.A. Esen's Ibibio Profile. The publication of the Ibibio orthography marked a turning point in the development of the Ibibio language. I shall discuss other publications as the need arises.

THE ORTHOGRAPHY OF THE IBIBIO LANGUAGE

In June 1982, the Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio, a cultural organization, set up a panel of 21 Ibibio men and women and charged it with the responsibility of producing an orthography for the Ibibio language within the shortest possible time. Membership of the panel was drawn from institutions of higher learning, the West African Examinations Council, the Civil Service, the Ibibio Traditional Rulers' Council and the Business Community. It had, as chairman, Professor O.E.Essien, (then) Dr. O.E. Essien.

On September 7, 1983, the Ibibio Language Panel formally presented the orthography to the then Cross River State Ministry of Education for approval. On September 12, 1983, the then Commissioner for Education, Professor E.J. Esua directed that Ibibio be taught in all schools in what is now Akwa Ibom State, based on the orthography.

The alphabet as presented in the orthography comprises 28 letters thus:

- a, b, d; e, e, f, gh, h, i, j, k, kp, m,
n, nw, o, o, ə, p, r, s, t, u, ụ, w, y.

Orthography representation of sounds	Phonetic representation	Examples of words in which they occur
a	∟a_/_	ákpán "first son"
ʌ	∟ʌ_/_	b̀̀k "tell a story"
b	∟b_/_	b̀̀k "be early"
d	∟d_/_	dí "come"
e	∟e_/_	èbé "husband"
f	∟f_/_	fát "embrace"
gh	∟ɣ_/_	tigha "kick"
h	∟x_/_	fehe "run"
i	∟i_/_	àmì "I" (1st pers. sing)
j	∟j_/_	b̀̀t "spread a mat"
k	∟k_/_	kó "yonder"
kp	∟kp_/_	kpé "pay"
m	∟m_/_	má "love/like"
n	∟n_/_	nám "do something"
ñ	∟ŋ_/_	ikpáñ "spoon"
n̄w	∟ŋw_/_	nwàm "help"
ny	∟ɲ_/_	nyàm "sell"
o	∟o_/_	bót "create"
o	∟ɔ_/_	b̀̀k "make soup"
ə	∟ə_/_	ǹ̀k "push"
p	∟p_/_	dápá "dream"
r	∟r_/_	brě "play"
s	∟s_/_	sé "look at"
t	∟t_/_	tó "throw at"
u	∟u_/_	úbók "hand"handle"
ụ	∟ɹ_/_	èkp̀̀ "rat"
w	∟w_/_	wèt "write"
y	∟y_/_	yét "wash"

As can be observed from the above examples tones are marked as follows:

´ High tone as in dí: "come"

˘ Lowtone as in bàk: "be early"

! Downstepped tone as in the second syllable of úké: where?

˘ Rising tone as in bré: "play"

^ Falling tone as in the second syllable of únâm: animal, meat.

The Ibibio Language Panel however recommended that tones should not be indicated in ordinary prose writing. It should also be observed that the Ibibio alphabet includes two rather unfamiliar letters: " " and " ^ ". These letters were included on phonemic and phonetic basis. The panel was encouraged to include these symbols (without diacritics) because of some recommendations by a SAOS working Group (Essien 1983:9).

THE GROWTH OF IBIBIO SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE ORTHOGRAPHY

Between 1983 and 1991, the Ibibio language has made giant strides towards development. In 1985, the National Language Centre of the Federal Ministry of Education published the Orthography in Manual III of Orthographies of Nigerian Languages, edited by Professor Ayo Banjo. In 1986, the Manual, which also contains the orthographies of Idoma, Nupe, Birom and Kalabari languages, was presented to and approved by the Joint Consultative Committee of the National Council on Education (N.E.C.).

Furthermore, the National Universities Commission (N.U.C.) has approved that Ibibio, along with seven other African languages be offered at the degree level. The University of Calabar, Calabar and the University of Cross River State, Uyo, have already started to implement the N.U.C. recommendations. In the University of Calabar, the Departments of Languages and Linguistics offers a core course in Ibibio entitled "Structure of the Ibibio Language". The course deals with the analysis of the

phonology, morphology and syntax of the Ibibio Language. It is hoped that full degree courses will be offered in Ibibio and other African languages if funding and staffing situation improve.

At the state level, the then Cross River State Ministry of Education, under the leadership of Ọbọọfi Enoch E. Udofia, set up a committee in 1985 to produce a syllabus for the Ibibio language. That committee headed by Professor O.E. Essien, submitted a draft syllabus in December 1985. The Ministry of Education, Calabar, approved the syllabus. Although a government directive had been given in 1983 that Ibibio be taught in schools, it was only in January 1987 that the teaching of the language actually started.

With regard to published materials, it is worthy of note that more and more individuals and publishers are showing keen interest in writing and publishing in and on the Ibibio language and culture. For example, the University Press Limited, Ibadan, commissioned the Ibibio Language Writers Association (ILWA), a learned society committed to the growth and development of the Ibibio language, to write a new graded course for the teaching of Ibibio in the primary school. The course comprises six books, that is one for each year, and is to be accompanied by a Teacher's Guide. At the moment, only books 1 - 4 of the primer series are out. The series entitled Kufre Mme Ndifreke: Edikood Nwed Ke Iko Ibibio (Kufre and Ndifreke: Reading Books in Ibibio) Books 1 - 4 were launched on Saturday, 21st April, 1990, at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos. Also, Daystar Press (Publishers), Ibadan commissioned and published in 1986 Ibibio Names: Their Structure and Their Meanings written by Professor O.E. Essien.

On Saturday, 3rd August, 1991, Ibibio educational books written by Ibibio-speaking men and women were launched in Uyo, under the auspices of Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio, a socio-philanthropic organisation of Ibibio youths founded in 1987. Notable among the books was the latest publication on Ibibio entitled The Ibibio, a collection of scholarly articles on the major aspects of Ibibio land and Ibibio culture, edited by Professor M.B. Abasiattai. The language can also boast of the following important publications, among others: a dictionary written by Elaine Kaufman (an

American woman) and jointly published by the University of Cross River State and the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, Holland; Emana Akwa Ibom Sted Ye Mme Uto Mfen (The Birth of Akwa Ibom State and other poems), an anthology of poems edited by ILWA a learned society formed six years ago under the able and professional leadership of Professor O.E. Essien; Abisi Ibibio (Ibibio ABC) published by Zekelson International Publications, a play entitled Mfon written by Professor O.E. Essien, books on the history, sociology and culture of the Ibibio, scholarly articles in learned national and international journals and Ph.D. and M.A. theses. These and other publications are listed in the references.

One of the activities of ILWA that deserves commendation is the workshop it has been organising for teachers of Ibibio language since 1988. The first ever workshop on the teaching of the Ibibio language took place in May, 1988, at the University of Cross River State, Uyo. In an address read at the opening ceremony of the workshop, the President of ILWA, Prof. O.E. Essien noted that:

.... since the formal teaching (of Ibibio) started, teachers have had considerable problems: they have no formal knowledge of the sound system of the language; they do not know how to relate some of the alphabetic symbols to the actual sounds of the language; they do not know how to describe and distinguish these sounds; they would be interested in relating some of the Ibibio sounds to the English ones so as to lay a sound foundation for the correct pronunciations of English sounds such as (y) and (g), which seem to trouble many an Ibibio speaker of English (for example, we no longer want to hear suvest for suggest, cate for gate.²

The rationale behind the workshop is therefore "to prepare teachers of Ibibio language in primary schools for effective teaching and guidance of pupils using Ibibio as the medium of instruction".³ It is worthy to note that during the first workshop in 1988, the Ibibio Language Teachers Association of Nigeria (ILTAN) was formed. So far, ILWA has organised eleven workshops in the various Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State: three in Uyo, two in Ikono and one each in Uruan, Itu, Ikot Abasi, Nsi Ubium, Onna and

Etnan.

To further enhance the growth of the Ibibio language, the electronic media now cultivates it. The news and other programmes are translated into Ibibio on the television and radio services of Akwa Ibom State.

NEW WORDS IN IBIBIO

One other achievement of ILWA which I must not fail to mention in this paper is its attempt to enrich the vocabulary of the Ibibio language by coining new words to meet new challenges, concepts and phenomenon. For example, the association has coined "Uyo ubop iko" for consonants and "Uyo utad iko" for vowels. Others are isenwed (barn for books) for library, aba-use-unam (place for keeping animals to look at) for zoo.

However, it is not always convenient to coin new words from the already existing ones in a language, as this may involve unnecessary descriptive approaches for certain technical ideas. In view of this ILWA recommends that Ibibio borrow from other languages (English in particular) in order to enrich the expressive capacity of the language. Such borrowed words should however be spelt and pronounced using the Ibibio orthography. Some of the borrowed words include Taip (type), sekondri (secondary), awa (hour), minik (minute), dokta (doctor), etc.

CONCLUSION

Given the short period (8 years) during which Ibibio has existed as a written language, one can say that it has made tremendous progress. The rapid growth of Ibibio can be attributed in part to the creation of Akwa Ibom State in 1987. Following the creation of the State, Ibibio ceased to be an appendage language, which it was in the erstwhile Cross River State. In May 1991, the Akwa Ibom State Government set up a panel to produce a syllabus for the Junior Secondary in Ibibio.

In Akwa Ibom State, Ibibio is the lingua franca, understood by all those who speak other dialects. The creation of Akwa Ibom State has greatly changed the attitude of Ibibio speakers towards their mother tongue. They

are now more aware of the importance of their mother tongue and prominent citizens of the state have lent moral and financial support to the development of the Ibibio language by funding workshops and publications. Commercial and Public Service advertisements can now be heard in Ibibio on Akwa Ibom State radio and television. Ibibio speakers try as much as possible to express themselves in Ibibio at social or official gatherings. For example, Mr. S. Samson-Akpan wrote and presented in Ibibio a symposium paper on 2nd March, 1989 at a ceremony to mark the installation of Okuibom and Ntison II of Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio.

Furthermore, it is the elite themselves who are promoting the growth of the language, and that seems to instil confidence in the rest of the people and lend credence to the whole exercise.

However, Ibibio has only undergone the basic stages of language development. There is still much to be done to ensure its continued growth so that it could meet the demands/challenges of our ever changing society.

It is sad to note that there is very little written literature in the language. Besides, the Holy Bible has not yet been translated into Ibibio, and more research needs to be carried out on the language. These projects call for adequate funding by Government, for this seems to be the major drawback to the production of reading materials in and on Ibibio. As a matter of fact, there is a manuscript of a play in Ibibio entitled Mfon, and an inventory of Ibibio proverbs among others, but because of high cost of publication, they have not seen the light of the day.

It should also be said that A Grammar of Ibibio Language is only a stepping stone in the study of the Ibibio grammar. More and more grammar books on Ibibio, using different theories of analysis, are desirable. The Federal, State and Local Governments, and philanthropists should invest adequately in the development and growth of the Ibibio language. For with some six million speakers, Ibibio can be said to be a privileged language in Nigeria.

It is gratifying to note that some Nigerian languages, notably the major ones spoken beyond the country's frontiers (Hausa and Yoruba) are receiving the attention of French linguists. These two languages are

presently being taught in the Institute National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales - INALCO (National Institute of Oriental languages and Civilisations) in Paris. It is my belief that if more Nigerian languages, including Ibibio, are fully developed, they could also be taught in INALCO. Indeed, outside Africa, emphasis has shifted to study of African Languages. Some time in October 1990, a Japanese Professor of Linguistics visited the Department of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Calabar and spent three months in Calabar and Akwa Ibom State, doing research on the Ibibio language. It is therefore high time the Government attached more importance to the study and development of most Nigerian languages because they are very necessary for effective development (whether political, social or economic) at grassroot level.

Finally, I urge speakers of those Nigerian languages that have no written form to take up to the challenge of developing their own languages.

NOTES

1. I am immensely grateful to Prof. O.E. Essien for kindly making available vital documents on the Ibibio language, including addresses at launches, letters to commissioners for Education in Akwa Ibom State and the erstwhile Cross River State, and letters from the National Language Centre, Ministry of Education, Lagos.
2. From an address read at the opening ceremony of the workshop on the teaching of the Ibibio Language by Prof. Okon E. Essien, President of the Ibibio Language Writers Association on the 11th May, 1988 at the University of Cross River State, Uyo.
3. From a write-up on the Workshop on Ibibio Language for primary school teachers produced by the Ibibio Language Writers Association in co-operation with Zekelson International Limited.

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