

Ozo-mekuri Ndimele (Ed.)

**Trends in the Study of
LANGUAGES & LINGUISTICS IN NIGERIA**

A Festschrift for Philip Akujuoobi Nwachukwu



21. The Languages of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria

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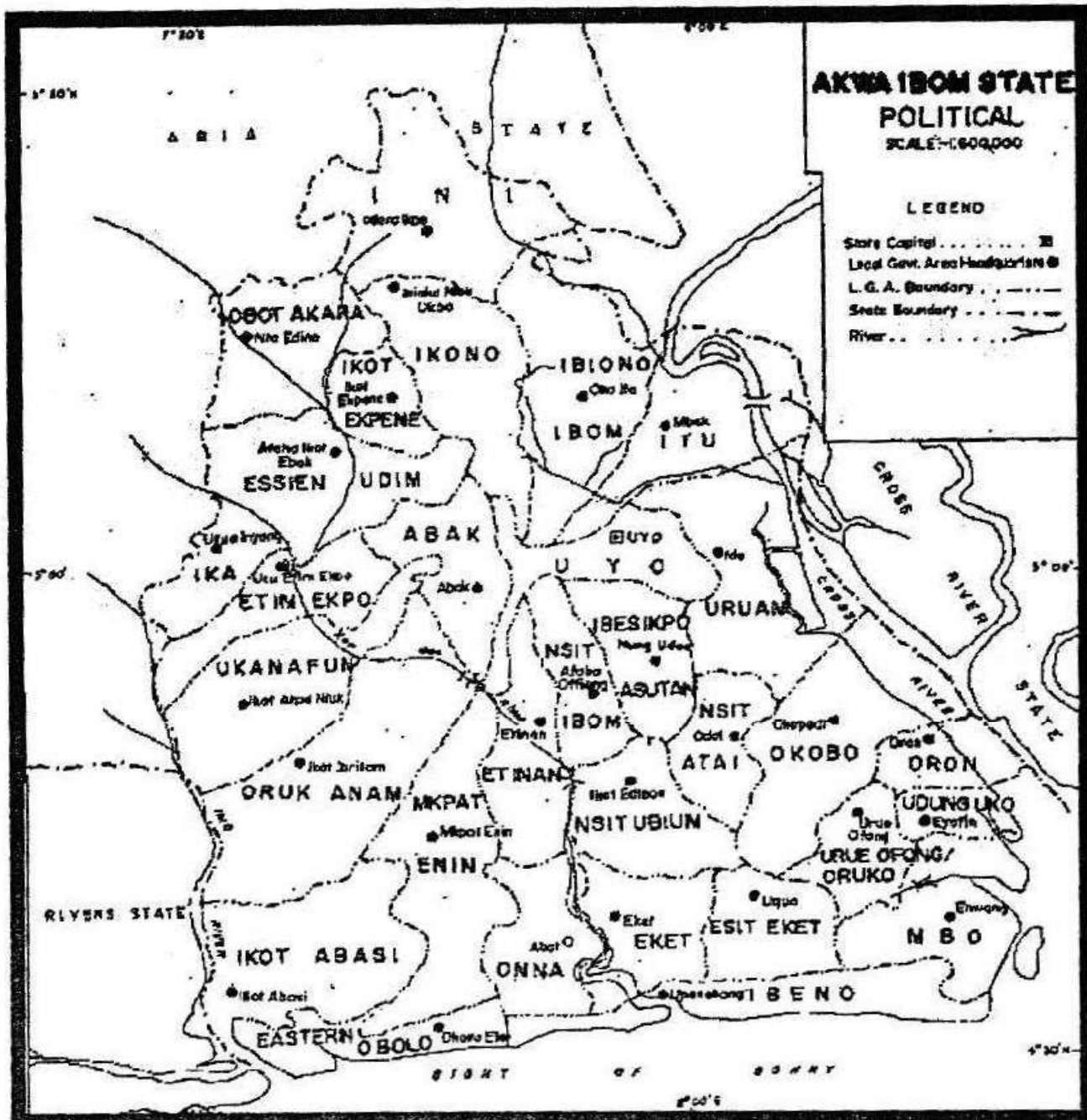
Abstract

The Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria is one of the linguistically homogenous states in the Nigerian federation. The linguistic homogeneity of the state has been threatened in recent times by a number of factors like the wish of some groups to carve a separate identity for themselves and the dynamics of politics, which result in constant readjustments of geopolitical units. Since such boundaries do not always exactly correspond to linguistic groups, they have emphasized differences in the linguistic structures. These constant changes need to be reflected in our linguistic records.

This paper attempts to provide an up-to-date information on the languages of the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, bearing these issues in mind. It is a preliminary report on the state, and most of the information here was sourced from the library and informants. However, we have started a survey project on the languages of Nigeria as a whole, and more data on Akwa Ibom State will be presented soon along with other states of the federation. Although this paper has also benefited from part of the on going survey project, what we have here is not conclusive.

1 Background on Akwa Ibom State

Akwa Ibom State is situated in the south eastern corner of Nigeria, as one of the states that make up the South-South Geopolitical Zone. It was created in 1987 with an initial 10 Local Government Areas (L.G.As.) out of the Old Cross River State, and it has Uyo as its capital.



Akwa Ibom State showing 31 L.G.As.

The state covers a total area of 8,421 square kilometers, with an average density of 280 persons. In terms of landmass, it is one of the smallest states in Nigeria (Usoro 2000). It has a total population of 2.4 million following the 1991 census.

It is one of the leading petroleum producing states in the country. Apart from this, it is endowed with other natural as well as human resources. It is perhaps for these reasons that it is fondly described as the 'land of promise'.

The people of Akwa Ibom State as presently constituted in the current geo-political entity have lived together for a very long time. Although the ethnic groups that make up the state are trying to carve out separate identities for themselves, it is generally agreed that they are very closely related groups, who may have migrated to their present abode at about the same period long time ago. Several estimated periods of these migrations have been given, and it is generally accepted that these people and their cultures have been settled in their present abode by 1200 AD, thus presenting an extremely antique culture and history (Uya 1994:19).

Akwa Ibom has an ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. This homogeneity however, has been a little disrupted by political disputes and leadership tussles. As far back as 1928, when the Ibibio State Union was founded as a political organization, all the ethnic/linguistic groups in the state today belonged to the same organization. One sure evidence of this fact today is the Ibibio State College which was and is still in Ikot Ekpene, an Anaang community. Some historians like Noah (1994:27), on the basis of some historical evidence in the midst of the controversies surrounding origins and migrations of the ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom conclude that the different ethnic groups may have migrated from one place even though they settled in their present abodes at different times.

2. Linguistic Classification and Genetic Affiliations of the Languages of Akwa Ibom State

The Ibibio language can rightly be considered as the state language for two reasons. Firstly, it is the language spoken in Uyo, the state's capital. Secondly, it is the largest of the linguistic groups, and it is spoken in about fourteen out of the 31 L.G.As. The Ibibio language which is the state language, is understood by speakers of the other varieties of the state, all of which have at least a one way mutual intelligibility with it. For the reasons already given, we refer to the varieties spoken in the state as very closely related language clusters. All of them belong to the **Lower Cross** sub group which spreads across the Cross River and parts of Rivers States as well. Their relationships are not in doubt at all as they have close phonological, syntactic and semantic features. Essien (1990)

suggested the proto term 'Ibibiod' for the languages spoken in the state, following classifications in other areas of the country.¹ But the choice of the word raises the issue of domination, and other groups in the state seem to resent it. However, we suggest a more 'neutral' term 'Ibom Languages',² given that all the languages that should be classified as 'Ibibiod' are spoken in Akwa Ibom (except Ukwa and Ito).

There are at least twenty one varieties of the Lower Cross group spoken in the state. These have different levels of mutual intelligibility and on this basis, a pattern of internal grouping has emerged in linguistic classifications of languages of the state. At least eleven of these varieties are very closely related and the most marked variety is Obolo. Crozier/Blench (1992), Connell (1994), Urua (1996) have very close classifications, and they all agree that apart from Obolo, all others are very closely related.

All these varieties have been reduced to three cluster groups by Egbokhare/Oyetade/Urua/Amfani (2001) in a recent reclassification of the languages of Nigeria into clusters, using mutual intelligibility. Interestingly, there is an introduction of a Lower Cross/Ibibiod group, which contains most of the varieties in the Lower Cross, leaving out Ukwa/Usakade and Obolo/Iko in separate clusters. The choice of Ibibiod as a cluster, as Essien (1990) suggests, falls in line with similar situations with the rest of the languages of Nigeria like Tivoid, Igboid, Ijoid, etc.

Some of these varieties have internal variations as well. For instance, Ibibio, Anaang, Efik, have internal variations. In table 1, we present a linguistic mini classification of the languages spoken in the state drawn from Egbokhare/Oyetade/Urua/Amfani (2001).

Table 1
Linguistic Classification and Genetic Affiliations of Languages in Akwa Ibom State

Group	Subgroup	Sub-subgroup	Clusters	Languages
Cross River	Delta Cross	Lower Cross	Lower Cross/Ibibiod	Ibibio Anaang (Annang) .. Efik Oro (Oron)

				Okobo Efai Ibino Itu Mbon Uso Ekit Etebi Ibuoro Ilue Ito Uda Idere
			Lower Cross (West)	Ibot Obolo Iko
			Lower Cross	Ukwa Usakade

3. A Geopolitical Profile of the Languages of Akwa Ibom State

Akwa Ibom State has 31 L.G.As. In this chapter, we present a geopolitical sketch of the languages of the state. We have identified about 10 languages in the state. This figure is small, when compared with Connell (1991), and Urua (1996), etc. with reasons. This work does not attempt any classification, but rather has drawn from previous works in the area, while at the same time, presenting the result of part of the current survey, which is guided largely by the people's definition of what version they speak. The population figures are taken from the 1991 census figures. A profile of the 31 L.G.As. is presented below :

1. Abak L.G.A.

Abak L.G.A is situated in the north-western part of the state. It has an approximate population of 108,833 people. It is a homogenous Anaang community, which speaks what we have classified as Central Anaang.

2. Eastern Obolo L.G.A.

Eastern Obolo is a heterogenous L.G.A, with a small population of about 13,911 people. It is situated in the south western coast of the state. In spite of its small population, it has three different

languages. The Obolo language which is also referred to as Andoni, Iko and Ibani. Ibibio is spoken as a lingua franca.

3. Eket L.G.A.

The Eket L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern coast of the state. With a population of about 82,610 people, it can be said to be a bilingual L.G.A. where the Ekit and Ibibio languages are spoken.

4. Esit Eket L.G.A.

Esit Eket L.G.A. used to be part of Ekit L.G.A., also situated in the south eastern part of the state. With a population of about 39,579; it can be considered a homogenous L.G.A., where Ekit is spoken.

5. Essien-Udim L.G.A.

Essien Udim is situated in the north western part of the state. It is a homogenous Anaang Community of about 130,215 speakers. It can be classified as part of northern Anaang

6. Etim-Ekpo L.G.A.

Etim Ekpo is also situated in the north western part of the state. It is a homogenous Anaang L.G.A., with a population of about 64,368 speakers, in Central Anaang.

7. Etinan L.G.A.

Etinan L.G.A. is situated in the central part of the state. It is a homogenous Ibibio speaking L.G.A., with a population of 90,085 speakers.

8. Ibeno L.G.A.

Ibeno L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern coastal line of the state. It has a population of about 42,249 speakers, majority of which speak the Ibino language. A small percentage of this figure speaks a variety of the Obolo (Andoni) language.

9. Ibesikpo Asutan L.G.A.

Ibesikpo Asutan L.G.A. is situated in the central part of the state. It has a population of about 81,825 of Ibibio speakers.

10. Ibiono Ibom L.G.A.

Ibiono Ibom L.G.A. is situated in north eastern part of the state. It has a population of about 54,835 speakers. It is a homogenous Ibibio community.

11. Ika L.G.A.

Ika L.G.A. is situated in western part of the state. It is a border L.G.A. with Igbo speaking community of Abia State. It has a

population of 54,835 speakers of Anaang speakers in Central Anaang area.

12. Ikono L.G.A.

Ikono L.G.A. is situated in northern part of the state. It has a population of about 92,521 of Ibibio speakers.

13. Ikot Abasi L.G.A.

Ikot Abasi L.G.A. is situated in the south western extreme of the state. It is a border L.G.A. with Rivers State. It is an Ibibio homogenous state with a population of about 66,160 speakers.

14. Ikot Ekpene L.G.A.

Ikot Ekpene L.G.A. is situated in northern part of the state. It constitutes part of Northern Anaang, and it is a homogenous Anaang L.G.A. of about 97,317 speakers.

15. Ini L.G.A.

Ini L.G.A. is situated in the extreme northern part of the state. It is made up of three Ibibio clan groups : Itu Mbon Uzo, Nkari and Iwerre. These groups are sometimes represented as separate linguistic groups. It can be considered as a linguistic homogenous group with dialectal variations, made up of about 71,292 speakers.

16. Itu L.G.A.

Itu L.G.A. is situated in the north eastern part of the state. It has a population of about 82,624 speakers. It is a border L.G.A. with Cross River State. The L.G.A. is made up of both Ibibio and Efik communities.

17. Mbo L.G.A.

Mbo L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern corner of the state. It has a population of 67,003 people. Majority of the communities in the L.G.A. speak different varieties of Oro. Enwang is the Oro variety spoken by the Mbo people. Enwang, Ebughu, Effiat, Uda, and Unyeññe are all varieties of Oro spoken in Mbo L.G.A. A small community in Idua speak a variety of Efik. This Efik variety is currently threatened by Oro and Ibibio. Efik is also spoken widely as a kind of lingua franca in the region, in addition to Ibibio.

18. Mkpat Enin L.G.A.

Mkpat Erin L.G.A. is situated in the south western part of the state. It is a homogenous Ibibio community of about 104,127 people.

19. Nsit Atai L.G.A.

Nsit Atai L.G.A. is situated in the southe eastern part of the state. It is a homogenous Ibibio speaking L.G.A. of about 37,658 people.

20. Nsit Ibom L.G.A.

Nsit Ibom L.G.A, is situated in the central part of the state. It is also a homogenous L.G.A. with a population of about 63,570 people.

21. Nsit Ubium L.G.A.

Nsit Ubium L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern part of the state. It has a population of about 73,826 Ibibio speakers.

22. Obot Akara L.G.A.

Obot Akara L.G.A. is situated in the extreme north western part of the state. It is a border L.G.A., with the Igbo of Abia state as neighbours. It is a homogenous Anaang community of bout 64,802 people.

23. Okobo L.G.A.

Okobo L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern part of the state. It has two linguistic groups : Okobo and Oro, with an estimated population of 69,433.

24. Onna L.G.A.

Onna L.G.A. is situated in the southern part of the state. It is a homogenous Ibibio linguistic group of about 113, 048 people.

25. Oron L.G.A.

Oron L.G.A. is situated in the south eastern corner of the state. It has an etsiamted population of about 55,735 people, majority of whom speak the Oro language. However, although Efik was a lingua franca in the area, a small minority in Idua speak Efik as an indigenous language.

26. Orue Ofong Oruko L.G.A.

Orue Ofong Oruko L.G.A. is a small L.G.A. (in terms of both size and population), in the south eastern corner of the state. It is an Oro-speaking community of about 30,848 people.

27. Oruk Anam L.G.A.

Oruk Anam L.G.A. is situated in the south western border of the state. It is a homogenous Anaang-speaking community of about 126,726 people.

28. Udung Uko L.G.A.

Udung Uko L.G.A. is a small Oro-speaking L.G.A., situated in the south eastern corner of the state's coastline. It has a population of about 26,134 people.

29. Ukanafun L.G.A.

Ukanafun L.G.A. is situated in the south western border of the state. It is an Anaang homogenous linguistic group of about 85,944 people.

30. Uruan L.G.A.

Uruan L.G.A. is situated on the central eastern border with the Cross River State. In fact the Cross River runs through it around the border. Although it is an Ibibio-speaking community, it has a lot of common ethnic and linguistic ties with the Efik. Ibibio and Efik are both spoken in the state, and it has an estimated population of about 79,968 people.

31. Uyo L.G.A.

Uyo is the capital of Akwa Ibom state. Uyo L.G.A. is situated in the central part of the state. It is an Ibibio speaking community with an estimated population of about 188,877 people. As a state capital, it has a mixture of languages from other groups from the state and from the other groups in Nigeria and beyond. In addition to English, which is the official language, the Pidgin language is widely spoken in the Uyo urban.

4. The Linguistic Situation in Akwa Ibom State

Akwa Ibom state is from purely linguistic evidence, one of the homogeneous states of the country. However, for some of the reasons already given, there has been a problem regarding the status of the varieties of the state. We appreciate the need of a people to carve out an identity whether separate or related to other groups, and we wish to respect such sentiments when expressed. In spite of overwhelming linguistic evidence therefore, self definition and the wish of the people seem to be the overriding principles defining the status of these varieties.³ For this reason, we refer to them as languages.

On the basis of population and the number of L.G.As that speak these varieties, we identify three dominant languages spoken in the state: Ibibio, Anaang and Oro.

Ibibio is spoken in about fifteen, out of the thirty one L.G.As that make up the state, including Uyo, the state capital. It is therefore the state language. The other L.G.As are Etinan, Ibesikpo Asutan, Ibiono Ibom, Ikono, Ikot Abasi, Itu, Mkpatt Enin, Nsit Ibom, Nsit Ubium, Nsit Atai, Onna, Ini, Uruan, and parts of Eket. In fact, it is a kind of lingua franca in the state.

The Anaang language is the second dominant language spoken in the state. It is spoken in eight (out of the thirty one L.G.As). These are: Ikot Ekpene, Abak, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Obot Akara, Ika, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun. The language has dialectal variations which correspond loosely to these L.G.As. Idem (1994:183) groups them broadly into three groups: Northern Anaang, made up of Ikot Ekpene, Eastern/Central, made up of Abak and Western/Southern made up of Ukanafun. However, following current geo-political readjustments, we group them into Northern Anaang made up of Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara and Essien Udim L.G.As, Central Anaang made up of Abak, Etim Ekpo and Ika L.G.As, and Southern Anaang made up of Ukanafun and Oruk Anam L.G.As.

The Oro language is the third dominant language in the state. It is spoken in five L.G.As (out of the thirty one L.G.As). These L.G.As are: Oron, Mbo, Okobo, Udung Uko and Urueong/Uruko. Within these L.G.As, Efik is also spoken along side Ibibio.

All other languages are spoken in one or two L.G.As of the state, and all of them are fairly homogeneous. Even Ini L.G.A which is made up of Itu Mbon Uso, Iwerre and Nkari linguistic groups, can be considered clan groups of Ibibio.

The Efik language is also spoken in some L.G.As of Akwa Ibom State like Uruan, Oron and Itu. The Efik language which served as a lingua franca along the Cross River basin since the beginning of colonialism in Nigeria, still serves as a kind of 'liturgical' language in the state. It is used in churches in Akwa Ibom, and this is partly due to the fact that the only complete Bible translation in the Lower Cross⁴ language is in Efik, published by the Bible Society of Nigeria, in 1985. Some Efik hymn books are also used by some Christian denominations, like, the Nelson's (1955) *ɲwed ikwɔ*, and the *Efik Hymn and Prayer Book*,

published for the Dioceses of Calabar and Ikot Ekpene by the Sisters of St. Peter Claver in 198.⁵

The Anaang language, the second dominant language in the state has no approved orthography yet, but one has been proposed (Michael/Obot 2001), and it is being processed for official approval.

The Oro language, the third dominant language also has no officially approved orthography yet, but efforts are currently being made to propose one. The large number of languages previously cited for Akwa Ibom arose from the fact that many of the varieties were represented as separate languages. However, recent works like Sam (ms), present these varieties as varieties of Oro. This classification is largely due to the speakers of the language, who have come together and set up a working committee that is working on an orthography for Oro. The committee is using the Oro variety as the standard, covering the nine varieties : Oro (Ukpabañ), Okobo, Enwañ, Ebughu, Ilue, Afai, Uda and Unyeññe.

In addition to these three dominant languages, there are others spoken in other L.G.As. like Ekit, spoken in Eket and Esit Eket L.G.As. Obolo, Iko and Ibani, are spoken in Eastern Obolo and Ibeno L.G.As.

Eket and Iko have quite a number of B.A. Projects following the policy of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian, University of Uyo, which describes one Akwa Ibom variety each year.

5. The Future of the languages of Akwa Ibom State

The languages of Akwa Ibom State have not had a uniform growth. The Ibibio language, which is the state language, has since 1983 when its orthography was approved, made very giant strides indeed. Although the orthography is due for a revision, there is a literary tradition being set, with many works being published in different aspects of the language. The Ibibio language is therefore a fairly developed language. The orthography paved the way for several publications in the language. It has a primer series, *Kufre Mme Ndifreke Edikod Nwed ke Ikọ Ibibio*, and some published texts like, *Ewod Nsarı Ekọkọk Okpọ*, (Iwokedok 1996), etc. Ibibio has an approved syllabus, and it is examined up to the Senior Secondary School level. There are many published descriptive works on Ibibio as well, like Essien (1990), Urua (2000) etc. Ibibio has a dictionary (Kaufman 1985), and it is used in the media for news broadcasts and advertisements. Ibibio language has the

approval of the National Universities' Commission (NUC), to be taught in the Nigerian universities along with Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Edo, Kanuri and Swahili (Essien 1990). A complete Bible translation project is currently being undertaken by Professor Okon Essien and a team of Ibibio experts. Apart from this, Ibibio is seriously being empowered to cope with the challenges of ICT and globalization. There is a Text-To-Speech conversion project being carried out by a collaboration of the Departments of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, the Departments of Computer Science, both of the University of Uyo, Nigeria and the University of Bielefeld, Germany. This project is trying to convert the human readable text which was made possible by the orthography (Essien 1983), the grammar (Essien 1990), and the dictionary (Kaufman 1985).

The Anaang language has a number of research works, some of which include : Utip (1983), Udondata (1983), Idem (1994, 1998), Udoh (1996, 1998), Michael (2000), etc.

The Oro language has had some descriptive works like Kuperus (1973). There are current efforts to propose an authority for the language.

The Efik language, although not a dominant language in Akwa Ibom State is one of the most studied languages in Nigeria, and indeed, it had enjoyed the expertise of some of the world's famous linguists, especially in the last century, like Hugh Goldie (1862, 1968), Ida Ward (1933), F. D. Winston (1960, 1970), Welmers (1966), Thomas L. Cook (1969a, 1969b, 1985), Essien (1978, 1982), etc. Cook (1985:4) is of the opinion, and rightly too, that Efik studies have influenced very significantly not only African Linguistics, but general linguistic theory. Some of its varieties spoken in some parts of the state are threatened. A case in point is the Idua variety in Oron, which is threatened by Oro and Ibibio.

Generally, a lot of work is currently being done on the languages of the state, especially by the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, and the Akwa Ibom State College of Education, Afaha Nsit. The former, currently has a tripartite collaboration with the University of Bielefeld, Germany and the University of Cocody, Abidjan, on a program of Computational Language Documentation, and this will naturally begin with Ibibio and other related languages. Apart from this, the

department investigates a variety spoken in the state each year and students' Projects and Dissertations are written in the particular variety chosen by the department for the year. The department so far has a data base of both electronic and hard copies of these works.

In addition to the efforts of the institutions in language development, some individuals and cultural groups have contributed to the growth of the Languages of the state. The Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio spearheaded the Ibibio orthography, with support from the government of the old Cross River State as well. The Anaang Community, Calabar, is currently spearheading the Anaang orthography, while the Oro Union, a socio cultural group is also spearheading the development of Oro orthography.

The Ibibio language is the only language with an approved orthography so far. The other languages are at different stages of underdevelopment. It is hoped that the Anaang and Oro orthographies which have reached advanced stages will be approved soon.

6. Conclusion

Akwa Ibom State is supposed to be one of the linguistically homogeneous states in Nigeria, but that homogeneity has been somewhat disrupted by political squabbles and ethnic sentiments. This has led to some confusion regarding the status of the different varieties spoken in different parts of the state. We have identified just about 10 languages. This is quite a small number when compared with the previous figures cited by Connell (1990), Urua (2000), etc. This figure was defined and determined by the speakers of the languages, and some of the varieties that were referred to as separate languages are clan groups of one of the dominant languages. We did not attempt any linguistic classification as this is outside the scope of the current work. However, we hasten to mention that even our figure is quite tentative, given that this is just work in progress.

We identified three of the languages as dominant on the basis of the population of speakers. The three dominant languages of the state are growing with Ibibio, the state language as the most developed. The growth of the languages is dependent on a combination of institutional, communal and individual efforts. The Ibibio orthography, approved since 1983 has placed Ibibio at an advantage, but other languages are making efforts to develop their own.

Notes

- ¹ Urua (2000), Egbokhare/Oyetunde/Urua/Amfani (2001), also used this classification.
- ² This suggestion is not exactly new. It was first mooted by Mrs. Eno Utip (of blessed memories), in the 80s. Unfortunately, we could not find any of the papers where she formally presented this idea. See also Udoh (1998).
- ³ This problem is not peculiar to Akwa Ibom State alone. The case of Rivers State is very similar to this.
- ⁴ A complete Bible translation project is currently being executed by Professor Okon Essien.
- ⁵ For more details on the Efik language, see chapter 4.

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