

ON THE SO-CALLED MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY AMONG ETSAKO DIALECTS

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In their work entitled *Orthographies of Nigerian Languages*, Okwudishu and Salami (2000) claim that with the possible exception of Ibie and Uweppawano (Wano) all dialects of Etsako share a high level of mutual intelligibility. Our investigations, however, suggest that they are only partly correct as they failed to point out that there are actually two Ibies: North Ibie and South Ibie and that Wano is only potentially mutually intelligible with South Ibie. We found out that there is little or no mutual intelligibility between Wano and North Ibie. Relying on lexico-statistic method, the present paper provides evidence to support this last claim and to argue that in fact contrary to Okwudishu and Salami's claim, mutual intelligibility among the other dialects of Etsako is a matter of degree, depending on distance between one and the other as well as other external influences.

Dans leur œuvre intitulée *Orthographies des Langues Nigériennes*, Okwudishu et Salami (2000) prétendent qu'avec l'exception possible des langues Ibie et Uweppawano (Wano) tous les dialectes d'Etsako partagent un niveau élevé d'intelligibilité mutuelle. Nos investigations, cependant, suggèrent qu'ils n'ont raison qu'en partie puisqu'ils manquent de montrer qu'il y a en vérité deux Ibies : l'Ibie du Nord et l'Ibie du Sud et que Wano n'est que potentiellement et mutuellement intelligible avec l'Ibie du Sud. Nous remarquons qu'il y a peu ou point d'intelligibilité mutuelle entre Wano et l'Ibie du Nord. En nous fondant sur la méthode lexico statique, cette communication fournit des preuves pour soutenir la prétention et l'argument qu'en fait contrairement à la prétention d'Okwudishu et Salami, l'intelligibilité mutuelle entre les autres dialectes d'Etsako est une question de degré, qui dépend de la distance entre l'un et l'autre aussi bien que d'autres influences extérieures.

0. INTRODUCTION

Little research attention has been paid to the study of dialectal variations of most minority indigenous languages in Nigeria. Most of the few existing works in this regard reveal that they are based on sentiments and hasty generalizations without regard to the negative effects these will have on the linguistic resources of the languages concerned.

Edo state is a multilingual state. Most of the languages are located in the northern part of the state which accounts for roughly one-third of the state. One of the most prominent of these languages is the Etsako language otherwise known as Yekhee (Elugbe 1986:10). Etsako is a multi-dialectal language and scholars (e.g. Okwudishu and Salami, 2000:33) have argued that these dialects are mutually intelligible. The present work, however, provides evidence to show that this claim is not exactly correct. This paper is, in effect, a review of previous conclusions on the degree of mutual intelligibility among the speakers of the various dialects of the language.

1. DIALECTAL VARIATION

The degree of mutual intelligibility among the dialects of a language can be determined by a cross-examination of certain linguistic structures (including but not limited to, vocabulary, and grammar) in the language concerned. Any conclusion that fails to take these factors into consideration will certainly be coloured by political and/or cultural sentiments, which might mislead the researcher into making hasty and faulty conclusions. This is what Yul-Ifode (2001:35) alludes to when she notes that “if one simply asked informants about their understanding of other dialects, one may get widely differing results, most of which are influenced by social, political or cultural sentiments”.

Determining the degree of mutual intelligibility among the dialects of a language, therefore, can only be reliably done through an objective assessment of the linguistic resources of the target language and not from a single or few individuals’ point of view as the latter is liable to be biased based on political, attitudinal, cultural or sociological factors. Capo (1979:420) advises language speakers to dismiss language consciousness and then dismantle its mechanisms, suggesting that linguistic criteria can be used to identify two tongues as dialects of the same language or as different languages. This view is equally shared by Poole (1999:105) who argues that the varieties we consider to be dialects may differ with regard to pronunciation, syntax, lexis and so on. That is, from the language structure we can see how languages and dialects vary from each other.

2. MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY

According to Wikipedia: the free Encyclopedia (as at November 5th 2009): “In linguistics, mutual intelligibility is recognized as a relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can readily understand each other without intentional study or extraordinary effort.” What is said of languages above is equally true of dialects which happen to be our specific focus in this paper. It therefore follows that mutual intelligibility is a feature exhibited by two or more dialects of a language. It can cut across distinct dialect boundaries where speakers can readily understand at least one or more of the other dialects without intentional study or extraordinary effort.

Mutual intelligibility is a yardstick used to determine the relationship that exists between two languages or dialects. If two dialects are mutually intelligible, they are regarded as dialects of a language, but if they are not they are separate languages. But this is not always the case, as mutual intelligibility is not necessarily a reliable yardstick for determining languages or dialects. That is to say, it is not always justifiable, or even reliable to classify languages into dialects on the basis of mutual intelligibility alone. But this does not in any way vitiate the importance of mutual intelligibility in ascertaining the relationship or otherwise between two dialects of a language or two different languages. If, for instance, the level of intelligibility between two languages is 100%, it is probably safe to regard them as two dialects of a language but if it is 50% which implies that one understands 50% and loses 50%, the two forms in question may be regarded as different languages or dialects of a language, depending on how one looks at it or on the socio-cultural cum political attitudes of the users of the two forms.

Mutual intelligibility is possible because of the similarities that exist in language structure. It encourages the recognition of differences in the speech of different speakers and as such enables us to recognize each other as speaking the same language or two different but very similar languages.

Intelligibility between languages can be asymmetric, in which case the speakers of language (A) understand more of language (B) than speakers of language (B) understand (A) (Poole, 1999:105, Akimayian and Demers 2004:279). In such a situation, Poole (1999) suggests that one or both speakers may accommodate their speech to that of the other speakers or to a more standard variety by avoiding certain features that they feel could be unfamiliar to the other person. Intelligibility is greater when speakers are using a more standard variety of speech than when they are using a local variety.

Intelligibility can be said to be mutual only when it is symmetric, that is speakers of (A) understand (B) as much as speakers of (B) understand (A). That is a situation in which, in the words of Poole (1999:105), intelligibility is 'in balance'.

Generally, intelligibility exists in varying degrees among many related or geographically proximate languages of the world often in the context of a dialect continuum. A dialect continuum is a situation where networks of geographically adjacent dialects are mutually comprehensible, but with comprehensibility steadily decreasing as distance between the dialects increases. In reality these dialects are not so clearly or neatly distinguishable instead, there is a continuum in variation and languages blend into one another. Due to dialect continuum there is a high rate of understanding between two dialects that are proximate geographically.

The implication of the above is that the concept of mutual intelligibility may not be as clear-cut as it may first seem, for some languages are mutually intelligible but are not dialects, while some dialects are not mutually intelligible. Experience shows that not all dialects of a language are mutually intelligible. For example our findings reveal that a speaker of the Okpella dialect of Etsako finds it difficult to understand a speaker of Jagbe dialect of the same Etsako language.

3. THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN ETSAKO

The Etsako speech community operates a multidialectal linguistic system. Our investigation reveals as we have already pointed out, that these dialects are not all mutually intelligible. While some are, some are not. To this effect the Uzairue dialect is generally regarded as the standard variety to facilitate communication among the speakers of other dialects.

There are eleven dialects of the Etsako language. Apart from these local varieties, English and pidgin are also spoken, while the indigenous dialects are used in everyday communication among speakers.

On the level of mutual intelligibility the dialects of Etsako are not as harmonized as portrayed by previous researchers. For instance, Okwudishu and Salami claim that:

“Speakers of Etsako claim that with the exception of Ivbie and Weppa-Uwano there is high rate of mutual intelligibility among speakers of Etsako dialects. This explains why one of the informants for the orthography project (Mr. Momoh) was able to speak three of the dialects (Auchi, Uzairue and Aviele with relative ease.” (2000:28).

Our own investigation shows that despite Mr. Momoh's ability to speak the three dialects "with relative ease" mutual intelligibility among the dialects of the Etsako language is not as simple as Okwudishu and Salami suggest. If we take Ibie and Wano dialects for instance the two dialects are located in the same Area Council but we found out that they are not mutually intelligible with each other. The fact is they are mutually intelligible with some other dialects for different reasons, as we shall show in the course of this study.

On the distribution of the Etsako dialects, we have come across widely differing results as to the number of major dialects in existence, Afegbua (2003:12), for instance, identified twelve dialects, which include: Auchi, Aviele, Anwain, South Ibie, Uzairue, North Ibie, Okpella, Avbianwu and Weppa-Wano. The other dialects of Ihiebe and Iviaro, on the one hand and North Uneme on the other, are spoken in Owan East L.G.A. and Akoko-Edo L.G.A. respectively.

On the other hand, Okwudishu and Salami (2000:28) recognize eight dialects: "Auchi, Uzairue, South Ivbie, Weppa-Uwano, Avbianwu, Avbiele, Ivbiadaobi and Ekpheli (Ekpheri) dialects."

Laver (1969) cited in Dunstan (1969:47) identifies seven dialects, namely: "Auchi, Avbianwu, Avbiele, Ekpheri, South Ivbie, Uzairue, and Weppa-Uwano dialects."

The different figures given by the different researchers above may be as a result of conflicting information provided by informants or due to linguistic changes over time.

4. ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE DIALECTS OF ESTAKO

In dealing with dialects, the vocabulary, phonological alteration, morphological alteration and syntactic constructions are central. These linguistic elements determine the degree of mutual intelligibility among the various existing dialects of the language. A critical analysis of the structure of the language will be crucial in determining the relationship that exists among the dialects of Etsako. Where a high degree of differences is observed in the language structure, mutual intelligibility will be said to be low. When it is 'in balance' (Poole 1999:105), mutual intelligibility will be regarded as fair, and when the degree of difference is minimal, a high degree of mutual intelligibility is expected. For ease of analysis, however, we shall regard 'fair' and 'low' degrees of mutual intelligibility as both low because we believe that in the final analysis, two dialects are either mutually intelligible or they are not.

In the present study, we shall use lexical similarity among the various dialects to attempt a prediction of the degree of mutual intelligibility among the dialects and, on the basis of our findings, postulate future expectancy.

5. LEXICAL SIMILARITY

The vocabulary is also known as the lexicon of a language. It is the natural dictionary stored in the convolutions between numbers 40-50 in the parietal lobe of the human brain (Finnegan and Basnier 1989:397). The vocabulary is a very delicate structure used essentially to established language relationships. According to Finnegan and Basnier (1989:397) the vocabulary provides a convenient illustration of how dialects vary. Lexical similarity, then, is a measure of the degree to which the word

sets of two given languages (or dialects) are similar (Rensch 1992:13). He further opines that 'a lexical similarity of 1 (or 100%) would mean a total overlap between vocabularies, whereas 0 means there are no common words?'

There are various methods of calculating lexical similarity and result obtained depends on the method used. In this study, we shall adopt the Ethnologue's method of calculation which consists in comparing a standardized set of wordlists and counting those forms that show similarity in form and meaning'.

Lexical similarity is only an indication of the mutual intelligibility of the two or more dialects being compared. A definitive statement on the degree of mutual intelligibility can only come from also determining the degree of phonetical, morphological, and syntactical similarity, which is outside the purview of this paper.

Focusing on the degree of lexical similarities to show degree of relationship between the dialects of a language, a high degree of lexical relationship of closely related languages is an indicator of potential intelligibility. As Grimes (1988) indicates in his study on correlation between vocabulary similarity and intelligibility, a high degree of lexical similarity enhances (but does not necessarily guarantee) mutual intelligibility whereas a low degree of lexical similarity always correlate with a low degree of intelligibility. According to him, intelligibility is unlikely when lexical similarity is below 60% while above 60% is helpful in identifying closely related languages.

The conclusion of the International language Assessment Conference (1990) gave the following list results: when the wordlist indicates a lexical similarity between two speech forms of less than 70% than the speech forms are different languages but if similarity is more than 70% dialect intelligibility testing is needed to determine how well people can understand each other.

The content of the vocabulary employed in such analysis as this is the basic vocabulary. The reason is that a fixed set of vocabulary is used rather than a list of arbitrary words. The basic vocabulary is made up of words learned during early childhood that are believed to be the least likely to change overtime. They include such items as body parts, numbers, the earth, nature etc. The proponents of this approach assert that while it is true that the phonology and morphology of certain language groups can be prone to ultra-rapid change, the same does not usually apply to the basic lexicon.

6. A LEXICO-STATISTIC ANALYSIS OF MAJOR DIALECTS OF ETSAKO

The lexico-statistic method was put forward by Morris Swadesh (1955). Yul-Ifode (2001:59) defines lexicostatistics as a method of assessing the degree of relationship among a group of languages by calculating and comparing the percentage of shared cognate words found on a standard list of basic vocabulary. This way, the method provides relative degree of relationship among languages or dialects, as we shall show presently in the case of the dialects of Etsako..

In our effort to determine the likely degree of mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako we decided to calculate the levels of lexico-statistical similarities among them using the Ethnologue's method of calculation. Statistical figures were thus assigned to cognate sets as follows:

- A. Cognates = 1
- B. Vocalic and Consonantal Alternation = 1
- C. Doubtful = 0

The process is captured in the formula below:

$$\frac{\text{Cognate}}{\text{Cognate} + \text{non-cognate}} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

This method is applied to select basic vocabulary of the five dialects selected for this study, namely: Okpella, North Ibie, Wano, Uzairue and Avbianwu. Our selection of these five from about eleven dialects of Etsako is predicated on the fact that they are the largest five dialects of Etsako, on the basis of information we got from Etsako West local government headquarters, Auchì.

The data employed were collected from the speakers of the different varieties. The Ibadan wordlist of 400 Basic items were used and each speaker gave their dialect's version of the gloss presented in English. The number of cognates present in a dialect is compared with those of other dialects taken one at a time. The total number of basic vocabulary divides the figure realized and the percentage of the result is realized. The results were used to establish the degree of lexico-statistical similarity among the dialects of the language, as illustrated in the equations in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1 Number of cognates out of 400 words on the Ibadan wordlist, pair wise between 5 dialects of Etsako

	Okpella	North Ibie	Wano	Uzairue	Avbianwu
Okpella					
North Ibie	282				
Wano	131	157			
Uzairue	181	156	278		
Avbianwu	140	163	274	292	

Table 2 % Cognates pair wise between 5 dialects of Etsako

	Okpella	North Ibie	Wano	Uzairue	Avbianwu
Okpella					
NorthIbie	71%				
Wano	33%	39%			
Uzairue	45%	39%	70%		
Avbianwu	35%	41%	69%	73%	

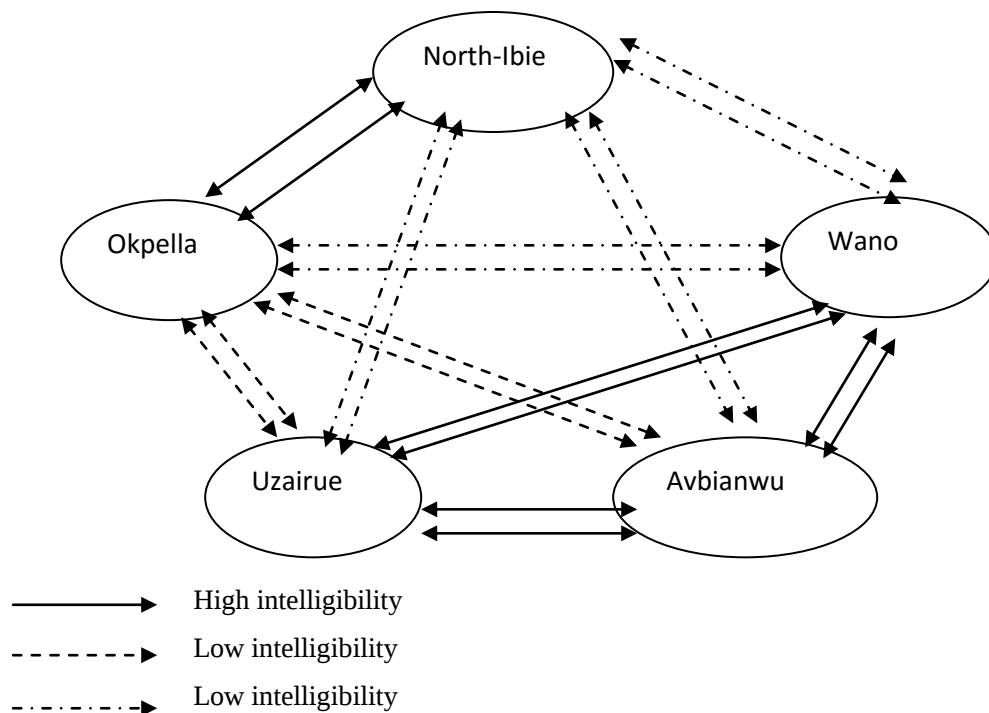
The data tabulated above shows the degree of lexico-statistical similarity among some dialects of Etsako. It shows that the lexical similarity between North Ibie and Okpella (71%) is high enough to allow mutual intelligibility, but further testing would be needed to prove whether or not there is mutual intelligibility. Similarly, there is low

lexical similarity between Okpella and Wano, based on our (Ibadan) wordlist, which suggest low mutual intelligibility.

7. DEGREE OF MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY AMONG THE FIVE ETSAKO DIALECTS

This paper is basically a response to the claim by Okwudishu and Salami (2000) that there is a high level of mutual intelligibility among all but two Etsako dialects. It is obvious that Okwudishu and Salami drew their conclusion from information gathered from informants rather than from a linguist's viewpoint. From our lexicostatistic analysis, we have been able to show (hopefully) that this opinion is not exactly accurate. From our data, it is obvious that mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako is a matter of degree. Our data reveals that while some dialects show potentials of mutual intelligibility, others do not. The degree of possible mutual intelligibility among Etsako dialects may be represented graphically thus:

Figure 1 The degree of potential mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako.



The above diagram reveals the degree of potential mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako. From it, we see that Okpella and North Ibie show likelihood of intelligibility, just as Uzairue, Avbianwu and Wano also do with each other. On the other hand, the potential degree of intelligibility between Okpella, Uzairue, Avbianwu and Wano on the one hand and North Ibie, Wano, and Avbianwu on the other is low. This confirms our earlier position that mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako is, if anything, a matter of degree.

8. CAUSES OF DIALECTICAL VARIATIONS IN ETSAKO

As our data has revealed, the degree of potential mutual intelligibility among the dialects of Etsako varies from one group of dialects to another. While Okpella and North Ibie dialects show high potentials of mutual intelligibility, it would take some prolonged interaction for the speakers of these dialects to understand Wano or Uzairue and vice-versa.

Questions have been asked as to why these dialects are not mutually intelligible. From our investigations, the reasons are mainly geographical. The case of the two Ibies is particularly interesting. According to Afegbua (2003:9) the North Ibie people migrated from the Ibie Naafe (South Ibie) to their present location. This movement has impacted seriously on their speech such that mutual intelligibility between the two Ibies is almost completely lost to the extent that today, it is obvious that the two Ibies speak two different dialects which are hardly mutually intelligible. We also discovered that while South Ibie is mutually intelligible with Uzairue, there is no such mutual intelligibility between any of these dialects and North Ibie. The difference between the dialects of the two Ibies may be seen from the following sample wordlist:

Table 3 North Ibie and South Ibie Comparative wordlist

	North Ibie	South Ibie	Gloss
1.	Twa	Du	Carry
2.	Oke	Eda	River
3.	Orili	Avhili	Oil
4.	Kowsho	Dukwo	Pour
5.	Ikapi	Uko	Spoon
6.	Owo	Okpa	One
7.	Be	Va	Come
8.	Eva	Eli	Name

Though the list above is rather too small to be a reliable yardstick for establishing low intelligibility between the two Ibies, it accords with our observation in the field that the two are hardly intelligible. Thus the table is only an indicative sample. Conversely, there exists a high degree of mutual intelligibility between North Ibie and Okpella but not between the latter and South Ibie.

The Wano dialect spoken in the Agenebode area is not mutually intelligible with either North Ibie or Okpella but is with Avbianwu, and Uzairue.

The Etsako map shows that Uzairue, Avbianwu and Wano are geographically proximate to Okpella and North Ibie but yet mutual intelligibility is poor. The reason for poor intelligibility is geographical, as we earlier noted. If a language is separated from other languages by natural barriers such as rivers, mountains, hills etc, this brings about minimal contact with the other groups. Okpella is situated in the valley surrounded by hills while North Ibie is situated on top of a mountain, making contact with other parts of Etsako minimal. This, in turn, is bringing the level of mutual intelligibility to near zero.

In fact, our prediction on the basis of our data and observation is that the Okpella and North Ibie dialects will gradually but surely become a language of its own in future while the other lower ground areas would become more mutually intelligible, perhaps merging into one dialect in time. The implication is that Etsako might in the

not too distant future split into two languages or even more. What this portends is that the Etsako language as we know it today could be lost and in its place would emerge two or more languages.

9. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to provide basis for assessing the degree of mutual intelligibility among the dialects of the Etsako language. The work, as we earlier indicated is a response to the claim by Okwudishu and Salami (2000) that virtually all dialects of Etsako are mutually intelligible.

In the course of this study we discovered that the speakers of these dialects, who provided much of the data for this work, do not actually know the names of their respective dialects. When confronted about the dialect they speak, they all reacted the same way, saying they speak Etsako. In fact, one of our informants confidently told us: “when I speak my neighbour who is from Okpella does not understand what I say, though he has the idea...”

The Etsako language is a network of dialects in which geographically adjacent dialects to a large extent appear to be mutually intelligible. Mutual intelligibility however seems to steadily decrease as the distance between the dialects increases. The boundaries between these dialects are not easily delineable as the dialects form a continuum with one blending into the other. Thus there is no clear-cut demarcation showing where one dialect ends and another begins. Nevertheless, the lexicostatistic method adopted for this study has shown that differences do exist among the dialects and that mutual intelligibility is sometimes so poor that it becomes reasonable to expect that some of the dialects might become languages of their own in the foreseeable future.

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