Linguistic evidence for heterogeneous origins of modern Esan language and identity

Esan people - Location of study: Esanland, Edo State, Nigeria
- 500,000 speakers of Esan, self-identify as Esan and with local sub-ethnic affiliation
- To West and South: the Edo people (also called Benin): the politically and culturally dominant – associated with the former Benin Kingdom
- The Esan people live in a constellation of autonomous polities (Esan “Kingdoms”)
  - Each kingdom is led by a traditional hereditary ruler known as the Ojie

Starting point:
- There are multiple pieces of evidence which show that there were multiple waves of migrations into Esanland - evidence for the “origins” of the Esan people
  - One wave: Beginning approximately 1,000 years ago, movement southwards
  - Two: Beginning in mid-15th century → immigrants from (around) Benin City
- Additional: What smaller historical events have contributed to the modern identity of the Esan people?

Central goal:
- How can linguistic evidence contribute to our understanding of the history of Esanland, the Esan people, and the Esan language?
Maps on this page:

**Right:** Edoid complex of cultures and their linguistic groupings (Elugbe 1989: 24)
- Straight line indicates a first (major) migration into modern day Esanland roughly 1,000 years ago
- Dashed line indicates a second migration roughly 550 years ago

**Bottom:** Map of modern day Esanland with polities (Lorenz 1995:418)
- Circled polities are those dialects studied in this investigation
Results thus far:

- **Southern Esan community of Ogwa:**
  - Shows features more closely related to Edo language → Evidence for second migration from Edo-speaking Benin City area

- **Northern Esan community of Uromi:**
  - Shows distinct linguistic features patterning with languages to the north
    - Suggests remnants of the first migration wave and/or non-Benin oriented historical events

2. Historical accounts

- Three interweaving migration narratives
  - [1] **Dynastic origin** - Attribute Esan foundations to the Benin kingdom around the mid 15th Century and thereafter
  - [2] **Pre-dynastic origins** – Not attributed to Benin Kingdom origin
  - [3] **Non-dynastic origin** - Smaller scale migrations from every direction in area

2.1. Dynastic origin

- Esan people stem from a migration from the Benin Kingdom in the 15th century
  - Relayed by a number of authors working from oral tradition
    - **Edo people:** Egharevba (1968 [1934]:84)
    - **Compiled by:** Bradbury 1957, Okojie 1960
  - During the reign of Oba Ewuare - mid 15th Century
    - Passed “laws of mourning” which forbade child-bearing and intercourse, bathing, house sweeping, drumming, dancing, and cooking within sight of the capital Benin City for three years (Okojie 1994:20-21)
  - Other dynastic narratives
    - Trace Esan origins to the Benin Kingdom - sons of Oba Egbeka, who fled the Benin Kingdom to assist their mother, who was accused of adultery (Okojie 1994:24)
    - Bradbury (1957:63-64) also describes a number of Benin-oriented origin traditions claimed by Esan people
      - [1] foundations from Edo warriors who did not return to Benin
      - [2] individuals placed by an Oba to guard shrines
      - [3] relatives banished by an Oba who had offended him
      - Among many others
  - **Common thread:** all historical accounts after rise of Benin Kingdom around 15th C
2.2. Pre-dynastic foundations

Oral history:
- Okojie (1994:1,23), Webster & Ogbomo (1997): Oral history recounts several Esan kingdoms which are said to have wielded local power before 15th century
  - Northern Esan: Irrua, Uromi, Ekpoma, Ubiaja, and Uzea
- Omorogie’s “History of Uromi” (repeated in Iwelomen 2007:235-263)
  - Uromi history is argued to span to at least 1050 AD when it began to emerge as a “collectivized polity” (Iwelomen 2007:235,263)
  - Pre-dynastic oral tradition origins are also noted by Eboreime (1998:311) and Okoduwa (2001:220)
- Bradbury 1957 notes that oral history relates an Oba of Benin (Ọba Ọzo lua, 15th C) dying in battle in northern Esanland while battling the Esan polity of Uromi. Suggests:
  - [1] Uromi was already in existence with non-Edo people (presumably speaking a distinct dialect/language from Edo) previous to the Edo expansion into Esanland
  - [2] This polity was very well organized politically and militarily to actually combat (if only temporarily) the powerful Benin Kingdom

Archaeological evidence:
- Darling (1988:122) : approximately 1,000 years ago, “there appears to have been a strong southward colonization by savannah/savannah-forest ecotone Edo speakers into the rain forest” of the modern day Esan and Edo forested regions \( \rightarrow \) proto-Edo/Esan society
- Evidence: network of man-made earthen ditch constructions (Darling 1984)
  - Ditch constructions are close to 16,000 kilometers in total length, and enclose around “6500 km2 of land occupied by Benin and Esan” (Darling 1988:123)
  - Found primarily in the northern region of Esanland (i.e. near Ekpoma, Irrua, Uromi, etc.) and the Eastern part of Benin
    - Benin City the capital, remains in the periphery of these constructions (Darling 1984:13; 1998:145)
  - Estimates a pre-dynastic Edo/Esan society existed which produced these ditch constructions starting around 750 AD (1984:336), after which a polarization began between the proto-Edo and proto-Esan societies
- Entails a migration into Esanland from northern Regions through Esanland and into Benin area, centuries prior to the rise of the Benin Kingdom

2.3. Non-dynastic origin accounts

- From North:
  - From Owan area (e.g. into the Ukhun, Idoa, Amahor kingdoms of Esan)
  - From the Etsako area (e.g. into Irrua)
- From East:
  - From the Western Igbo area (e.g. into Amahor)
2.3. From South:
- From the Warri area (e.g. into Ekpon)
- Immigrants from Urhoboland in the Idumuowele area of the Ujiogba kingdom
- Lorenz (1995: 57-58): “communities in Ewohimi, Ewatto, Ekpon and Amahor on the southern fringe of Ishan were founded by Ika Igbos”

2.4. Summary
- **Esanland**: a cross-roads for many different peoples at different times, resulting in the various kingdoms being of a heterogeneous composition, with the unifying factor being “accept[ing] the authority of the onogie [sic.]” or other political leader “in whose territory they settled” (Bradbury 1957:64)

3. Language study

**If this heterogeneous composition of Esanland is true, how is this reflected linguistically?**

3.1. Methodology of Study:
- Systematic comparison of 416 words
  - Uromi Esan: spoken in Northern Esanland; an “original” pre-Benin, pre-dynastic settlement
    - Data sources: Klomp 1993, Osiruemu (nd), personal field notes
  - Ogwa Esan: spoken in Southern Esanland; founded after the dynastic influence from Benin area
    - Data sources: Osiruemu (nd), personal field notes
- These data were compared to data on surrounding languages
  - [1] Edo language – West of Esan – descendent of hypothetical language spoken in second wave of migration
    - Data Sources: Melzian 1937, Munro 1967, Agheyisi 1986
    - Data sources: Elimelech 1976, Elugbe 1989
  - [3] Owan (Ora/Emai/Iuleha) language cluster – Northwest of Esan – Might have same conservative forms as conservative Esan dialects
    - Data sources: Schaefer & Egbohre 2007, Elugbe 1989
3.2. Results of the language study

- Within these dialect differences, data corpus show that Ogwa Esan patterns with Edo in 69/173 instances, or about 40% of time
  - Of these 69 instances, there are 38 instances in which Uromi patterns with a northern variety of Etsako and/or Owan to the exclusion of Ogwa Esan and Edo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Edo</th>
<th>Ogwa Esan</th>
<th>Uromi Esan</th>
<th>Etsako dialect</th>
<th>Owan dialect</th>
<th>Number of instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uromi with Etsako &amp; Owan</td>
<td>Lizard (common)</td>
<td>ègàlà̀ǹi</td>
<td>ègàlà̀zì/ agalazi</td>
<td>èbèmì́ọ̀bè́ǹ</td>
<td>èbèmì́ọ̀bè́ǹ/ umhamhi/ omhẹ̀mhi</td>
<td>èmì́ẹ̀mì́</td>
<td>11/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tree</td>
<td>è́r̀hàn (sg/pl)</td>
<td>è́ràn (sg) è́ràn (pl)</td>
<td>órhà/óthà (sg) òrhà/óthà (pl)</td>
<td>órhà/óthà (sg) òrhà/óthà (pl)</td>
<td>órhà/óthà (sg) òrhà/óthà (pl)</td>
<td>22/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uromi with Etsako</td>
<td>to pound</td>
<td>dùnnmù̀n</td>
<td>dùbhùn</td>
<td>lubhùn</td>
<td>lumì́</td>
<td>dùmè́</td>
<td>5/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>horse</td>
<td>è́sìn</td>
<td>è́sin</td>
<td>àkà́sì</td>
<td>àkà́sì/àkà́tì</td>
<td>è́sì</td>
<td>5/38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uromi with Owan</td>
<td>Leopard</td>
<td>atalakpa, èkpen</td>
<td>àtànàkò̀pà</td>
<td>èbè̀rì̀à</td>
<td>èkpe</td>
<td>èbè́rì̀à, èkpe</td>
<td>5/38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total:
38 instances in which a form in Uromi corresponds to a form in Etsako/Owan **to the exclusion of Edo and Ogwa Esan**

38/173 = 22% of total differences in Esan dialects
3.3. Interpretation and complications

- This language study has shown non-negligible linguistic association between the northern Esan dialect – Uromi – and languages north of Esaland - Owan and Etsako
- Suggests two possibilities:
  - [1] Dialect differences in Uromi are archaisms (from Benin Kingdom perspective)
    - Differences are conservative forms of an older Uromi dialect/language which existed in this area before being incorporated into the Benin kingdom
    - Remnants of a language which was more closely related to the northern languages from which the original migration was launched into Esanland
  - [2] Differences are borrowings
    - Uromi language has been influenced over time by Etsako/Owan, but the language does not directly descend from them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uromi Patterning with Etsako &amp; Owan (to exclusion of Ogwa Esan/Edo) - 11 words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lizard (common variety), tree, axe, back, bat, bee, breast (female), rope, skin,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sweet (tasty), thorn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uromi patterning with Etsako only (to exclusion of Ogwa Esan/Edo) – 22 words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pound (in mortar), oil, boat/canoe, bury, cat, coconut, cow (zebu), crocodile,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duck, lick, name, fat, hat/cap, rainy season, root/vein, run, shirt, sweep,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>town, wind, horse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Supports a historical scenario in which the development of Northern Esan identity and society is to some degree distinct from newer, post-Dynastic parts of Esanland

• **However,** differences between these dialects is relatively small, when compared with other related languages of area
  o Suggests much of an original Uromi language is not recoverable
  o A general “leveling” of linguistic structure, which has accompanied the great political restructuring which took place when pre-dynastic polities in Esanland became absorbed into the Benin Kingdom

Please email or come see me for any references or the full version of this paper, which include references.

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**Comments and criticism very much welcome!**

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