A Sociolinguistic Summary of
the Obe Cluster survey of Cross River State, Nigeria

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Acknowledgment

1. Introduction

This report concerns the sociolinguistic survey of several dialects, languages spoken in the Obudu, Ogoja and Bekwarra local government areas (LGA) of northern Cross River Sate, Nigeria, carried out by the authors who are surveyors from Language Development Facilitators in April 2009. In particular, we surveyed six language varieties (Afrike, Irungene, Utugwang, Okworogung, Mgbenege and Ukwortung shown in Map 1). The second edition of *An index of Nigerian languages* (Crozier and Blench 1992) lists them as the Obe cluster. The fifteenth edition of the *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005) lists them as Putukwam [afe]. During the survey we did not find anyone who knew the meaning of Putukwam and what it referred to. In this report, we shall follow Crozier and Blench in referring to them as the Obe cluster.

From the Ethnologue and the background research, it was also reported that the speakers of these dialects understand Bekwarra [bkv], so we collected wordlists and a story from Bekwarra and tested them in most of the dialects. Since the Mbe area (see Map 2) is geographically close to the Irungene area (and because they share common identity) we collected a wordlist from Mbe to see how they are related linguistically.

Map 1: Overview of area surveyed with location of villages visited

Map sources: Surveyor GPS data, www.MapLibrary.com and seamless.usgs.gov
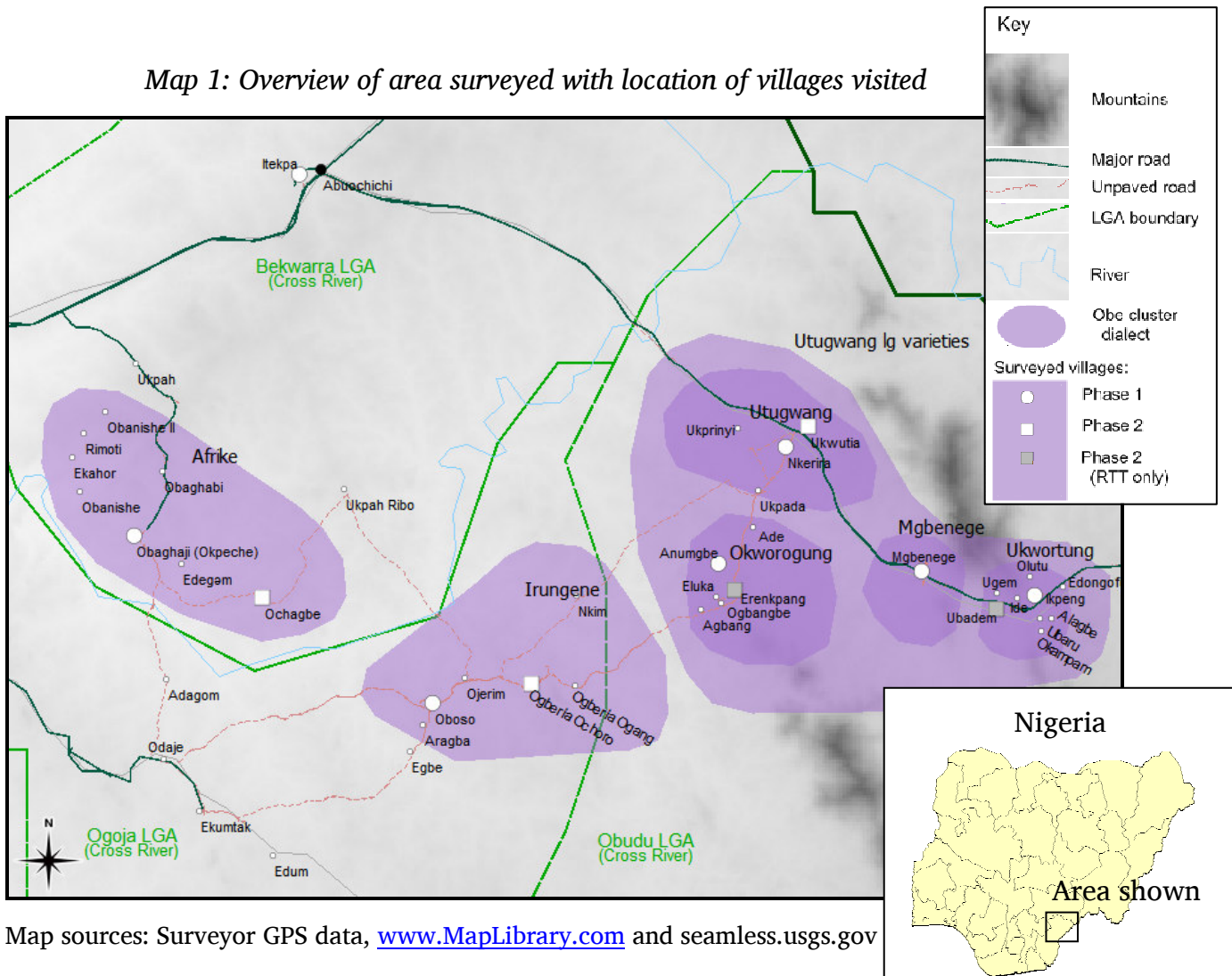
1.1. Goals and concepts

The goal of surveying the Obe cluster of Cross River State was to provide information for decision making as the people develop their language with the help of other interested parties. The focus was to collect data to determine how many and which speech varieties spoken by the people in the Obe cluster need to be developed into a written form so that they all have access to literature that they will understand well.

Data was gathered concerning a large variety of concepts namely the peoples' own sense of social and linguistic identity, the vitality of each speech variety, intelligibility between these varieties, the acceptability to develop varieties besides each speaker's own and the level of literacy.

Each concept was connected to a varying number of research. The various instruments used to collect the data are summarized in section 1.2.

1.2. Introduction to methodology

1.2.1. Interviews

In each village we visited, we asked the village chief or a local pastor if we could ask questions of a group of people of various ages, both male and female. During group interviews, with people constantly coming and going, the size of the group never remained the same. Because of this we did not have control over who answered the questions. Hence the answers and opinions given to our questions are most likely a consensus of the group. The answers were not the beliefs of one person or a few individuals. We also separately interviewed individuals, school teachers and religious leaders.

The interview questions were posed using Standard English or Nigerian Pidgin English (Pidgin) [pcm], covering a wide range of concepts. If needed, the questions were interpreted into the local language by someone from the group who could speak Standard English or Pidgin and the vernacular. Responses were translated as necessary into English[1] by the interpreter.

1.2.2. Recorded Text Testing

We used Recorded Text Testing (RTT), based on a model developed by SIL in Mexico, as a tool for comparison studies of related speech varieties (Casad, 1974). In the RTT technique, a sample of speech in the form of a narrative text is recorded from one location and replayed at a second location where people speak a speech form related to that of the first location. Ten questions covering the content of the narrative are interspersed into the second playback of the text in order to measure how well the subject understands the text. RTT scores are averaged for the ten or so participants for each location.

1.2.3. Wordlists

We used wordlists as instruments for comparison of a wide range of lexical items. We elicited a 348 item wordlist in each of the locations we visited during the first phase of our survey.

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[1] The term "English" when appearing alone in this report is intentionally ambiguous, referring to Standard English, Pidgin English or both.

1.2.4. Observation

Observation is a qualitative tool that helps to understand how quantitative data should be interpreted based on careful watching of uncontrolled, or "normal", behaviour and on listening to speech events. The survey team attempted to incorporate observation into its research whenever possible, in particular, focusing on who speaks what language to whom and when. Throughout each day observations were recorded in a small notebook and discussed as a team at the beginning of the next day. Observations were summarized and saved for future reference. Observation is much more effective if the observer is able to understand the languages of wider communication (LWCs) and recognize what languages are being spoken. In this area Standard English and Pidgin are LWCs. We realize that a brief survey visit does not allow enough time for this tool to be used for maximum effect, but we recognize its importance and have therefore included it as much as possible in our research.

1.2.5. Sampling

We visited two villages for each dialect except Mgbenege, where we only visited one. We visited more remote villages in all the varieties except Utugwang, Mgbenege and Ukwortung of which the majority of the population is settled on a main road. People who live on the main road tend to have more contact with other language varieties. Because of this, they are more likely to borrow words from their neighbouring varieties. They also are more likely to have learned to speak their neighbouring varieties. Thus when possible, we visited locations that were likely to have the purest speech form with the least contact.

When we arrived in each area, we made a deliberate decision to visit two of the villages based on the following criteria:

· Homogeneous population of speakers of the dialect under consideration

· Limited contact of village population with speakers of other dialects

· Not on a major road

· Willingness of village leaders to cooperate

All the places we visited were able to fit all of the above criteria (except Utugwang, Mgbenege and Ukwortung). We generally succeeded at finding the appropriate locations where we were able to undertake our research.

To select subjects for RTT we accepted the first available students that met our criteria. As was mentioned in section 1.2.1, we were not able to truly "sample" the population for the group interview schedules, but asked a group of available people the questions. Generally the group consisted of a core of five to fifteen men, usually between 30 and 60 years of age, with an additional group of onlookers of different ages, including children. Occasionally, there were women and girls present.

We also interviewed individuals in each village. We selected forty individuals from each village ten from each of the following four categories; elderly (50 +), middle aged (35-49), youth[2] (16-34) and children (5-15). In each group of ten there were five females and five males.

We interviewed church leaders in each of the villages. We aimed at interviewing leaders of larger churches, but where this was not possible, we interviewed any church leader we could find.

School teachers, especially headmasters or principals, were interviewed. We focused mainly on primary schools, but in some cases, we also interviewed secondary school teachers or principals.

1.3. Previous research

Very little research has been conducted on the Obe cluster dialects and modern work that does exist remains unpublished or inaccessible. According to the Ethnologue (Gordon, 2005), the second edition of An Index of Nigerian Languages (Crozier and Blench, 1992) and The Niger-Congo Languages (Bendor-Samuel, 1989), the dialects within the cluster are genetically classified thus: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Cross River, Bendi.

Roger Blench did a comparative study of Bendi languages (including the Obe cluster), concluding that Bendi shows no link with Cross River but "its closest relatives are the Bantoid languages, notably Ekoid" (2001, yet to be published). Blench mentions that Chumbow (1986) "discusses Ogberia, a dialect of Obe [Irungene] in an unpublished conference paper."

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[2] In many African countries including Nigeria, this is a common age range to be considered as "youth"

The Ethnologue (Gordon, 2005) reports that the dialects of the cluster include: Afrike, Utugwang, Ukwortung, Okworogung, Obe (Irungene) and Oboso. It adds that Bekwarra is understood by the Obe cluster.

Paul Schroeder (2007) mentioned that the Mbe Afal [Irungene] understood the Bekwarra New Testament when it was read to them (personal communication). Jim Pohlig (2009), in a personal communication states that "the Upper Mbe [Irungene] is a dialect of Bekwarra and is not mutually comprehensible at all with Lower Mbe [Mbe]."

Before the actual survey, one of our team members undertook a trip to the language areas. During the trip each of the dialect areas was visited. From what was reported at various places, it seemed that Ukwortung, Okworogung, Mgbenege and Utugwang were more closely related to each other than to the other dialects. However, it was also reported that there is some level of understanding between these four and the other languages in the cluster (Afrike and Irungene) and with Bekwarra.

1.4. Social setting

1.4.1. Languages surrounding the Obe

The Obe cluster is mainly surrounded by Bantoid and Bendi languages. See Map 2 and Table 1: Languages surrounding Obe. Bekwarra has also been spelled (less accurately phonetically) as Bekworra or Bekworrah (Stanford 1967: 9). The Bette have also had their language spelled as Bete, but we follow the spelling used in an early undated Bette orthography (NBTT n.d.). The Nkum are also known as Ishibori, but we will refer to them by their autonym, Nkum.

Map 2: Languages surrounding the Obe cluster

Map Sources: Surveyor GPS, *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005)
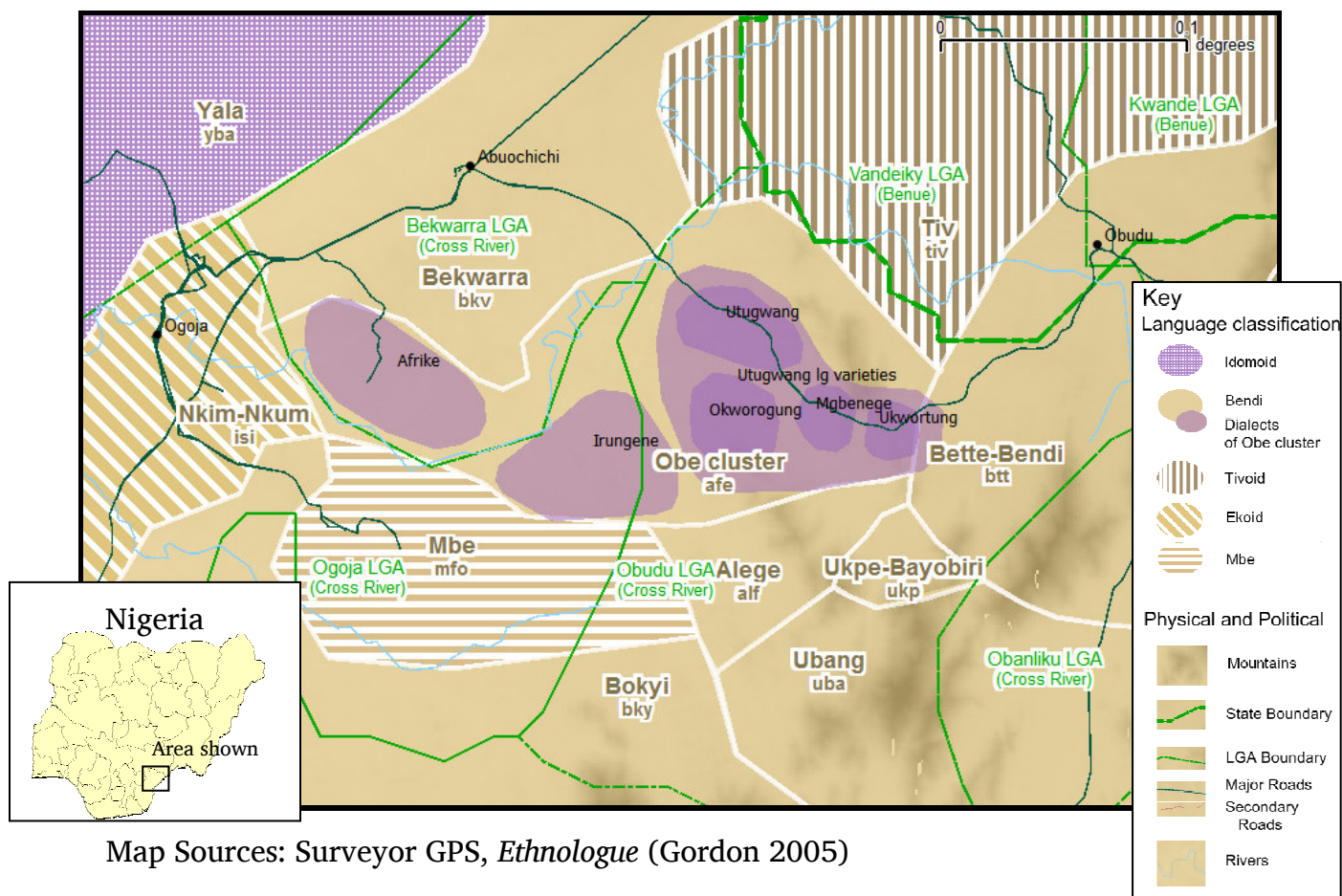
Table 1: Languages surrounding Obe

Obe Cluster dialect	Neighbouring Bantoid or Bendi language
Afrike	Bekwarra [bkv], Mbe [mfo] and Nkim [isi]
Utugwang Okworogung Mgbenege Ukwortung	Bekwarra [bkv], Bette-Bendi [btt], Alege [alf], Ukpe [ukp], Tiv [tiv], Ubang [uba] and Bokyi [bky]
Irungene	Mbe [mfo] and Bokyi [bky]

1.4.2. Intermarriage

It is common for people to marry mostly from among themselves and also from their neighbouring languages. As a result of this, the people would probably borrow parts of their immediate neighbours' languages. The Obe people are not an exception to this.

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Most of their wives come from Bekwarra, Mbe, Bokyi, Alege, Bette, Ukpe, Nkim and Ubang.

1.4.3. Resident outsiders

There are some foreigners living among the people surveyed. They are farmers, traders and businessmen. The people of the Obe cluster reported that they speak Pidgin with them and that the foreigners' children learn to speak the Obe cluster dialects.

1.4.4. Agriculture and markets

The main crops of the Obe cluster were reported to be yam, cassava, rice, groundnut, cocoa, palm, maize, okra, cocoa yam and beneseed.

Market day is one of the important social and economic events in Nigeria. The main markets of the people are located in Nkerira, Utugwang, Okpeche, Ochagbe, Okworogung, Oboso, Aragba and Ojerim. They rotate on a five day schedule. The people also report that they attend other markets in the surrounding neighbourhoods like Bekwarra, Alege, Ukpe, Bette, Mbe and Nkum. Of all these markets, the one that seems to be most central to the people is the one at Utugwang.

1.4.5. Health care services

Almost all the villages visited reported to have at least one kind of local health clinic, health centre or a dispensary with some nurses. The only exception is in Mgbenege where they reported not to have any clinic. There are also hospitals in some of the nearby towns like Obudu and Ogoja which cater to the health needs of the people.

1.4.6. Population

We were not able to find accurate population data. The people reported they have a total of 61 villages.

2. Summary of sociolinguistic identity
How do speakers of the varieties identify with other varieties?

The Obe identify themselves in two sub-groups:

- Utugwang, Okworogung, Ukwortung and Mgbenege, who call themselves "Utugwang"

- Irungene and Afrike who do not have a common name

Between the two sub-groups, Irungene and Afrike sometimes consider themselves as the same people and language with the "Utugwang" language varieties. Among the "Utugwang" groups interviewed, only in the Utugwang variety do they consider Afrike and Irungene to be the same language.

How similar are the varieties of the Obe cluster?

The Obe cluster varieties are lexically similar to each other, but they are relatively dissimilar to Bekwarra and they are completely different from Mbe. Within the cluster, Irungene and Afrike are more similar to each other. Utugwang, Okworogung, Mgbenege and Ukwortung are also very close to each other.

3. Summary of intelligibility

What language(s) do the people think they can understand?

Communication among the "Utugwang" were reported to happen normally without having to slow their speech. Afrike and Irungene also reported to speak normally with each other, except in one Irungene village (Ogberia) where it was reported that they speak their own variety slowly with the Afrike.

Which varieties can people score >75%?

Although we only tested a single narrative text in each variety, the results from the RTT show that the intelligibility amongst the Obe cluster is generally very high in several of the varieties. All the varieties have been able to score at least 75% or higher on at least one other variety.

Is there one variety all groups score >75%?

We found that every school tested was able to score 87% or higher on the Utugwang and Okworogung RTTs. These results, however, must not be interpreted on their own.

4. Summary of bilingualism

What other languages are spoken by these peoples?

The languages of wider communication are Pidgin and Standard English. Many also speak Bekwarra and Bette, especially those living near to these neighbouring

languages. Several individuals also speak other languages, but none of these are spoken by a majority in any village.

What is the perceived proficiency of each social segment?

The young and the middle-aged (16-49 years) are reported to speak the best Pidgin and Standard English. Some of the younger children and the most elderly were reported and observed to not speak Pidgin or Standard English well.

Bekwarra is spoken by a majority of those interviewed in Afrike and Utugwang, but also spoken or at least understood in many of the other villages. More middle-aged (35-49 years) people reported they speak Bekwarra (83%) than the other age groups (47-69%).

5. Summary of linguistic vitality

Do the people have a healthy attitude towards their own language?

The people maintain a strong positive attitude towards their language, although they value English as a way to go far in this world. The people value their language because they identify themselves with it and understand it better than any other.

Do the children speak their own variety fluently?

The children often speak their own variety better than any other language. From our interviews and our observations the children speak their own language in a variety of domains, but occasionally they mix in English.

In what domains is an Obe variety the primary language?

The local language is used by all ages in the home. It is reported and sometimes observed to be used at village meetings, funerals, on the farm and to scold children. In church English and the local language are used for songs. Although sermons are typically in English, they are usually interpreted into the local language. English is used in schools though the local language is often used in early classes.

Will the local language be spoken in the future?

The people have a good attitude towards their language. New roads, unforeseen government policy and production of literature in a language all can have significant

impact on the future of linguistic vitality. There are however, many signs that the local language will continue to be spoken. The people speak it in many domains and the children are still learning and using it.

6. Summary of acceptability
Which varieties are people willing to read/write?

Nearly all of the people from each language variety have said that they are willing to learn to read and write their own language. In group interviews, the Irungene and Afrike reported that after their own variety, they would each choose the other for language development, with the exception of Ogberia who would choose Okworogung second. However, when individuals were interviewed, the Irungene and Afrike people do not appear so united. Many Afrike people stated that they would choose Bekwarra or Utugwang ahead of Irungene though 90% agreed they would like their children to learn to read Irungene. Some individuals (30% of those asked) in Irungene said they would not allow their children to read and write Afrike. Irungene speakers also had no clear second or third choice for development.

Okworogung, Ukwortung and Mgbenege speakers (and also quite a few speakers of Irungene and Afrike) almost unanimously chose Utugwang when asked if they would be willing to read and write in a language variety that is not their own.

Is there existing literature?

There is no existing literature and no standardized written form of any of the Obe dialects. The only literature available in this area is in Bette and Bekwarra which are not of much use to the people of the Obe Cluster.

What are the people's feelings or attitudes towards related languages?

Language acceptability and understanding are high between Irungene and Afrike which suggests that either language might be acceptable for language development. For Okworogung, Utugwang, Mgbenege and Ukwortung speakers either Okworogung or Utugwang may be appropriate for language development because of high test scores and positive attitudes on the post-RTT questions. Because of negative responses on the

post-RTT questions it is not likely that Bekwarra would be an appropriate language for use by Irungene.

7. Summary of literacy

How many people can read and write? In which languages? How well?

In the Obe cluster 10% of those interviewed can read or write in their own language, despite the lack of a standard orthography. There is a significant percentage reporting that they can read and write in Standard English, but no formal literacy testing has been done so we are unsure how well they can read and write in Standard English.

How many people have access to education? To what level?

There are numerous primary and secondary schools in one half of the Obe cluster, but fewer in the other half of the cluster. There are two institutions of higher education, one in Obudu and one in Ogoja. Nearly everyone under the age of fifty has some level of education, but only 37% of people between 16 and 49 have ten years or more of education.

8. Conclusion

The Obe cluster includes: Afrike, Irungene, Utugwang, Okworogung, Ukwortung and Mgbenege. Bekwarra, Bette and Mbe (not part of the Obe cluster) cannot serve any of the Obe cluster varieties sufficiently. Although some people of the Obe cluster are bilingual in these and other neighbouring languages, there are not enough to say that this would serve the whole population.

Every location where we tested subjects averaged 92% or higher on the Utugwang text, which shows high understanding. However, the Utugwang subjects' scores on the Afrike and Irungene test are 64% and 63% respectively, which show low understanding. This reveals that the understanding is not mutual. The entire group may have had high contact with the Utugwang which may be responsible for the high score on the Utugwang test, or the inherent understanding may simply not be mutual. Despite the fact that Utugwang may be acquired by others, the acquisition would be at a very young age by the majority of the population.

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Afrike and Irungene reported that they are the same people and language and some of them also identify with the Utugwang people and language. They are also lexically more similar to each than they are to the "Utugwang" language varieties. Their children have a positive attitude towards each other, but their attitude towards Okworogung, the nearest "Utugwang" dialect, is different. Some people in Utugwang interviewed said that they are different people from the Afrike and Irungene. Surprisingly, although in the group interviews Afrike and Irungene chose each other ahead of the other Obe cluster varieties, the individual interviews were not so clear. Afrike individuals often chose Bekwarra and Utugwang, and Irungene had no clear second choice.

In the light of the above we make the following suggestions:

1. That Utugwang could be developed to the serve the whole cluster.

or

2. That the cluster may possibly be better served with two projects:

   Afrike/Irungene and Utugwang/Okworogung /Mgbenege/Ukwortung. Between Afrike and Irungene we have no significant reason to prefer one to the other. Either of these could be developed. In the last grouping, Utugwang could be developed.

Although the second suggestion seems more practical to the surveyors, either solution may work well. Community leaders should be consulted in regards to which suggestion to follow. If the community leaders follow the second suggestion, they will still have to decide which of Afrike or Irungene should be developed.

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