Summary Report of a Sociolinguistic Survey of the Obanliku Speech Varieties of Cross River State, Nigeria

An Abridged Version of a Full Report

Rev. Linus Otronyi, John Muniru, Marcus Hansley, Carol Magnusson, Michael J. Rueck and Zachariah Yoder

Language Development Facilitators
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Abstract

This report presents a sociolinguistic survey conducted in the Obanliku speech communities of Obanliku LGA, Cross River State, Nigeria. The purpose of the survey was to determine the best possible way by which the Obanliku can gain access to the Scriptures and other kinds of literature in their language. Through participatory methods and group interviews, the researchers collected data concerning reported levels of dialect intercomprehension, language use in public and private domains, peoples’ attitudes towards the dialects, reported levels of bilingualism in various languages, as well as education and literacy levels. While the elicitation and comparison of wordlists was used in determining extent of shared vocabulary between the dialects, the administration of dialect intelligibility testing provided insights into the level of inherent dialect intelligibility. Our findings show that all Obanliku dialects have very strong vitality and are very much in use. Considering all factors, Bette Scripture would not sufficiently serve the Obanliku. If a language development programme is embarked upon in the Obanliku language, Bisu is the most favoured to be the reference dialect for such a programme.
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1. Introduction

Between the 19th of January and 2nd of February 2011, we, the survey team from Language Development Facilitators, Jos, conducted a linguistic and sociolinguistic survey in the northern part of the Obanliku Local Government Area (LGA) of Cross-River State, Nigeria. Specifically, we surveyed the Bisu, Busi, Bishiri (or Bishi), Bebi and Basang speech varieties. These varieties are listed as dialects of the Obanliku language [bzy] in the sixteenth edition of the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009). However, the second edition of An Index of Nigerian Languages (Crozier and Blench 1992) lists each of them as independent languages but under the entry name “Obanliku cluster”. With inconsistency such as this it seems it is not yet agreed among linguists how best to refer to the varieties. Hence, throughout this report we refer to Bisu, Busi, Bishiri, Bebi and Basang as varieties of the Obanliku1 language.

The purpose of this survey was to determine the best possible way by which the Obanliku can gain access to the Scriptures and other kinds of literature.

From the background research, we learnt that some of the speakers of these speech varieties understand Bette (Kleiner 1965) and, perhaps, the Bendi dialect also [bkv]. Bette and Bendi are the two dialects that make up Bette-Bendi language (Hansford, et al. 1976). The New Testament was published in Bette dialect in 1982. We further learnt that the speakers of the five Obanliku varieties, Bette and Bendi were geographically and politically close neighbours. They were together under Obudu LGA until 1997 when the Obanliku LGA was created out of the old Obudu LGA. The newly created Obanliku LGA includes not only the speakers of Obanliku varieties but also of Bendi and other varieties.2

Bearing the above in mind, our goals for the survey were:

- to ascertain which of the Obanliku varieties could be developed into a written form to serve all the Obanliku speakers well.
- to learn whether the Obanliku churches are willing to do what they can to obtain the Scriptures in their own language; and
- to determine whether the speakers of the Obanliku speech varieties could likely use the Scriptures and literature in Bette;

We used 360-item wordlists, interviews, observation, participatory methods, and recorded text testing to gather linguistic and sociolinguistic information which helped achieve the set goals. But concerning the last goal, when we learnt from the people during the survey that only a few of them (mostly old people) could understand Bette and/or Bendi, we decided not to conduct comprehension testing for them in either Bette or Bendi.

In this summary report, our aim is to present the results of the analysed data collected during the survey, and to provide answers to our research questions. Each section is introduced with a concept, then research questions related to the concept are raised and answered one after the other.

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1 Note that the speakers of Bisu, Busi, Bishiri, Bebi and Basang as a people (or ethnic group) called themselves Obanliku.

2 Other languages within the Obanliku LGA include Otank [uta], Iceve-Maci [bec] and Evant [bzz].
2. Language Identification

2.1. How many varieties are spoken in the Obanliku language area?

The people reported that there are only five Obanliku speech varieties spoken in the area. The said varieties are Bisu, Busi, Basang, Bebi and Bishiri.

2.2. How are the Obanliku varieties related to neighbouring languages?

Neighbouring languages or varieties include Bendi [btt], Bette [btt], Otank [uta], Iceve-Maci [bec], Evant [bzz], and Tiv [tiv]. According to Nicholas Faraclas, the Obanliku varieties, Bette and Bendi belong to the same language family of Bendi (Faraclas 1989). They share a similar basic word order (SVO), sound inventory and phonological and morphological compositions. Our wordlist comparison of the varieties shows that Bendi and Bette are between 64% and 71% lexically similar with the Obanliku varieties (see Figure 2).

Otank, Iceve-Maci, Evant and Tiv are Tivoid languages whose relationship with the Obanliku varieties is a distant one (Regnier 1990).

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3 Nicholas Faraclas’ classification of Bendi languages, according to him, is based on Williamson (1971), Hansford, et al. (1976), and Connell (pers. comm.)

4 SVO stands for subject-verb-object
2.3. How similar are the varieties of the Obanliku language?

The people reported during group interviews that the five varieties of Obanliku are very similar, most stating that they can all understand one another. There are exceptions to this: Bebi speakers said their younger ones cannot understand Basang, so Basang speakers switch to another language\(^5\) to communicate with Bebi youngsters. Likewise, Bishiri speakers said that Basang speakers have to change to another language to converse with them.

From a comparison of 360-item wordlists, we can see:

- Amongst the five varieties of Obanliku, Basang is the most different lexically.
- Bisu, Bishiri and Bebi are most lexically similar among Obanliku varieties.
- Bendi and Bette are lexically the most different of the varieties compared. However, even these varieties have a lexical similarity higher than 60% with the Obanliku dialects.

### Figure 2 Lexical Similarity Percentages of Obanliku varieties, Bette and Bendi

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Basang (Udeshi)</th>
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<td>95 Busi (Bikaa)</td>
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<td>91 70 72 71 72 70 71 82 Bette</td>
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3. Social Identity

3.1. How many ethnic groups are there?

The people claimed they are only one ethnic group called Obanliku. But they are divided into five sub-groups, namely Bisu, Busi, Basang, Bishiri and Bebi.

3.2. How do they relate to each other?

All the people share a common history, except the Basang. The people of Bayalele (Basang) reported that they came from Tiv area. The others reported that they came “from the mountain”, usually pointing to the mountain nearest to their village. Despite this difference of history, they see themselves as one people group.

\(^5\) Although neither Bebi speakers nor Bishiri speakers mentioned the language(s) Basang speakers would likely switch to when conversing with them, we guess it could either be Pidgin or Standard English both being languages of wider communication in the area.
3.3. What varieties do the Obanliku speak?

Each sub-group speaks its own variety: Bisu, Busi, Basang, Bishiri and Bebi.

4. Contact Patterns

4.1. What are the church networks like in the area?

All the villages we visited have at least two churches attended by the dwellers of the village concerned.

Church denominations in the area, according to the church leaders, include Roman Catholic, Apostolic, Assemblies of God (AG), Deeper Life, Living Faith, Tabernacle, Saved by Grace, Christ for the World Mission, Mount Zion, Pentecostal Church of Nigeria and ECWA. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) are the two Christian church associations.

Assemblies of God with its district headquarters in Obudu and Roman Catholic with its parish headquarters in Sankwala appear to be the most popular church denominations in the area and have the highest number of local congregations within the area. In fact, we saw the local congregations of both denominations in each of the villages we visited.

The church leaders of AG and Catholic churches in Bayaga (a Bisu village) named speakers of Bette, Bendi, Bishiri and Basang as the common worshippers in their local churches. In Shikpeche (a Bishiri village), the AG pastor said Bishiri, Bette, Bebi and Bisu people usually attend his church.

4.2. What are the government units in the area?

The government units in the area are in this order:

- LGA council headed by an executive chairman;
- ward represented by a councillor at the LGA council’s legislature;
- the LGA’s traditional rulers’ council headed by a paramount ruler;
- a clan headed by a clan head;
- a village headed by a village head/chief.

All the subgroups of the Obanliku ethnic group are within the Obanliku LGA. But each has its own political ward, except Bishiri, which has two wards—Bishiri-South and Bishiri-North.

4.3. What are the local development associations in the area?

Each of the dialect areas has a central local development association where all the villages within the dialect area send representatives to meet and discuss issues affecting the dialect area. During the survey, we arrived at a Basang village (Bayalele) when a meeting of one such association in the area was just ending. The meeting was well-attended by clan heads and village chiefs and executives within

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6 Evangelical Church Winning All
the Basang area. There are many other development associations in the area addressing different social and community issues.

4.4. What are the economic/commercial centres in the area?

Commercial activities are carried out at markets, provision stores, medicine stores, restaurants and palm wine joints within the area. The people of each dialect area except Bisu people reported that they have a market in their area. The Sankwala and Obudu markets are reportedly the major markets which are frequently visited by all Obanliku dialect groups. The two markets are held every fifth day.

5. Language Vitality

The answers to the following questions are important indicators of how likely it is that a language will continue as a vital means of communication.

5.1. Do the children speak the local language fluently?

Children in almost all the villages were reported to speak the local language fluently. The people also said that the children speak Pidgin and English, but added that they (the children) learn the local language before any other language.

5.2. In which domain(s) is the local language the primary language?

The local language was reported to be the primary language in the home. Grandparents, parents, children, brothers and sisters and husbands and wives were reported and observed to be using the local language with each other in all the villages we visited. It was also said to be dominant at the farm, playground7 (village square), village meetings, market, church and during hunting. Furthermore, the people reported that they use the vernacular for songs, riddles, jokes, stories and parables.

5.3. Which language is dominant in which domains?

The local language is reportedly the dominant language in the home and in most village domains. On the other hand, English was reported to be dominant at school and in the office. We did observe the people speaking Pidgin in some informal domains.

5.4. What is the peoples’ perception of the vitality of their language?

The people appeared confident that their language would remain functional even in the future. They are also optimistic that their children would continue speaking the vernacular and would pass it on to future generations. According to those we interviewed they would be unhappy if the generation yet to be born refused to use the language.

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7 A playground is the village square where people meet.
5.5. What are the people’s attitudes towards their own language?

The attitude of the people towards their language appears positive. They claimed that it was good to speak it because it was their language and the most useful language in the area. Despite the fact that they also use English and Pidgin for other reasons, they believe that their language is superior to English. They said that they speak their language almost always, but not when they are with people of different language groups. We observed they are very comfortable using their language and even proud of it. When asked about the death of their language, they said they would not be happy should that come to pass.

5.6. What are their attitudes towards languages of wider communication?

From all indications, the people’s attitudes towards the use of English appear strong. Parents were said to be happy whenever they heard their children speaking English. The reasons for this, according to the people, are that English is the lingua-franca in Nigeria and that their children are sent to school to learn English and be exposed to the English world. Despite the fact that Pidgin is widely spoken in informal domains (although not as much as the vernacular), the people said they were not happy when the children use it. Only one group (Busanfong) felt that children’s use of Pidgin is a step towards learning English.

6. Language Acceptability

6.1. Which varieties are people willing to read/write?

The people reported that they would like a language development programme in their variety and would encourage their children to read and write in it. They also said they would learn to read and write in a different dialect than their own, and would allow their children to do the same. However, in Bayaluga (a Bebi village) they said they would only learn Bisu or Bishiri, not Busi, Basang or Bendi. Also, at Busanfong (a Bisu village), they only chose Busi as another dialect they would learn to read and write.

6.2. How do the people feel about related languages?

Some of the people admitted they understand and speak Bendi and Bette, though they see them as different from the Obanliku varieties. Although the Obanliku have a separate identity from the Bendi and Bette, we observed that they are on good terms with each other. Concerning Otank, Iceve-Maci and Evant, the people said they would need to speak another language in order to communicate with them.

7. Intelligibility

In order to measure comprehension, we used the Recorded Text Testing (RTT) method. We recorded natural texts about an event in a person’s life in each of the five varieties and played them for speakers of the other varieties. These test subjects were asked 10 comprehension questions to measure their understanding of the text.
7.1. Which varieties can people score over 75% (RTT) on?

Among the five varieties, only Basang stands out as clearly different based on a 75% comprehension cut-off. Busi, Bebi, Bisu, and Bishiri subjects averaged 83% or higher on each other’s texts. The comprehension of the Basang dialect seems to be irregular. Subjects from the other varieties averaged between 54% and 70% on the Basang text, while the Basang subjects averaged between 85% and 95% on the other texts.

The irregularity may be due to some inherent relationship between the languages, but it seems more likely that it is due to the opportunity for Basang subjects to contact speakers of the other varieties. If this is the case, the contact seems to be fairly uniform; the standard deviation between subjects’ scores is 15% or less for each text. If the ability to understand the related varieties is acquired, it is acquired from an early age. The median age of the Basang subjects was 16 years, and the oldest subjects were 18 years old.

7.2. Is there one variety all groups score over 75% on?

The Busi, Bebi, Bisu and Bishiri texts were all understood well by speakers of all five language varieties; all scored 85% or higher on each of these four tests. Although this does not guarantee that speakers would understand everything said in these varieties, it means we did not find any indication in the RTT testing that there is a problem with comprehension of these four dialects.

7.3. What do the people think they can understand?

Through participatory methods, Bisu was chosen by the people as “best understood by all [Bisu, Busi, Bishiri, Bebi and Basang]”. Though the speakers of Basang East did not list Bisu in the top three best understood by them, they did choose Bisu as third best understood by all Obanliku.

8. Potential Project Support

8.1. Do the Obanliku church leaders feel Scripture in Obanliku will be helpful?

Most of the church leaders interviewed expressed a strong desire for Scripture translation into Obanliku. Their major reason for this is that it would help the people to understand the Scriptures and the Gospels better than they currently do. However, there are two non-Obanliku pastors who feel otherwise. One feels it would not be necessary because it is “too hard to read and write [in Obanliku]”, while the other one was of the view that the people could use the Bette Bible. However, this second pastor added, “If all [Obanliku people] can come together to agree on one dialect to be used, then it [Scripture in Obanliku] is needed.”

Out of the three AG pastors interviewed,⁹ only one said Obanliku Scriptures would be helpful.

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⁸ This is the minimum intelligibility level for people to use literature in another dialect (SIL 1991).
⁹ All three AG pastors interviewed are not Obanliku.
8.2. Does the Obanliku church want Scripture in their language?

Yes. A pastor expressed their desire for Scripture in Obanliku like this: “We have really desired this [Obanliku Bible for a] long time. I really like to read and write in my language [Obanliku].” A catechist said “We’ve been praying and trying to translate and write prayer books and portions of the Scriptures in our language.”

8.3. What will they do to get Scripture translated into their language?

If there were to be a Bible translation project in Obanliku, all the church leaders interviewed listed funds, food, water, office space, accommodation, land and means of transportation as some of the things the people could provide to aid the translation team and project. The clergymen also suggested names of persons in the area who could serve as translators.

According to most of the clergymen, the Obanliku church would support the translation project by:

- setting up a translation committee;
- providing funds;
- verbal support (most especially from the pulpit).

In addition, a few said the church would pray continuously for the project, provide food and accommodation for the translation team, and could help explain difficult terms in the language.

All of the clergymen we interviewed expressed the willingness of their denominations to work in close collaboration with other Christian denominations on an Obanliku Bible translation project.

9. Bilingual Proficiency/Language Use

9.1. What other languages are spoken by this people?

The Obanliku people claim to speak Pidgin and English. We did observe some of them using both languages. A few were also reported to be able to speak Bette and Bendi.

9.2. Are any neighbouring languages spoken by the Obanliku?

The people in four of the ten Obanliku villages visited said a few of them could speak Bendi and Bette.

9.3. Which segments of society use which languages? What is the perceived proficiency of the different social segments in each language?

All age categories claimed they speak various levels of Pidgin, although the young and middle-aged people were reported and observed to use it better than the children and older people.

In most of the villages the children, the young and middle-aged are reported to be able to speak English, with the young being reported to speak it the best. In a few villages the old men also claimed to speak English.
9.4. How/where do people learn these languages?

Pidgin and English are reportedly learnt in school. Bette and Bendi were said to be learnt at the market.

10. Literacy

10.1. How many of each age group read and write in which languages?

Middle-age men, young men and young women, for the most part, can read and write in English. In most of the villages visited, only a few of the old men and old women were reported to be literate in English, except in Beegbong and Bayaga, where the people said the old men and old women can neither read nor write. Middle-age women in Busi and Bebi villages can read and write, but there are only a few women that are literate in English in the other varieties’ villages. Most children in Bayaga, Shikpeche and Udeshi can read and write in English, but in the other villages only a few say they can read and write. No one reported that they could read and write in any other language apart from English.

10.2. How well does each age group read and write in which languages?

No one reported to be able to read and write well in any other language apart from English. Most middle-age men, young men and young women reported to read and write well, “properly” or very well in English. The old men in Bayaluga and Busanfong are reported to not read and write well, but in Bikaa and Udeshi they can read and write well. Old women for the most part do not read and write well. Middle-age women in Busanfong and Udeshi read and write well, but not so well in all other villages. Children were reported to read and write well in Bayaluga and Beegbong, but in the other villages they do not.

In Bayaga, Shikpeche and Buya and for the older generations in Beegbong, we did not learn how well the people could read or write.

10.3. Are the people interested in reading and writing their language?

In the Bebi, Basang and Bishiri areas there have been some attempts to write down the language. For instance, music has been written for church choirs in Bayaluga, and a person attempted to translate the Bible at Shikpeche.

People in Bikaa, Busanfong and Shikpeche have written letters in their language, but only people at Shikpeche say they have no difficulty with writing letters.

There have been no literacy programmes in the vernacular except for a Bette programme in Busanfong. All the groups interviewed reported that they would like a literacy programme in their language and would encourage their children to read and write in the vernacular. They also said they would learn to read and write in a different variety than their own. However, in Bayaluga they said they would only learn Bisu or Bishiri, not Busi, Basang or Bendi. As far the people in Busanfong are concerned they would only learn Busi.
10.4. What Obanliku literature is available within the community?

As much as we can tell, no literature has been published in any of the varieties. However, people reported that some literature has been written, though not published.

The New Testament and some AG Sunday School materials have been translated into Bette, however only a few people, mostly pastors, had these in the Obanliku area. It was observed that the English Bible was most commonly used in church, although the Bible readers (during the church service) often interpreted into their Obanliku language variety.

11. Conclusions and Recommendations:

From the answers to the above research questions, we draw the following conclusions:

Bisu, Busi, Bishiri, Basang and Bebi are the five varieties that make up the Obanliku language, located within the Obanliku LGA of Cross River State.

Although the speakers of the Bisu, Busi, Bishiri, Basang and Bebi varieties have their own separate identities, their own political wards and their own development associations, they also see themselves as one Obanliku people, speaking the same language. They all claim the same origin “from [the top of] the mountain” except the western Basang who are from the Tiv area. The people’s attitude towards the five Obanliku varieties is positive. The Obanliku see the Bendi as a separate people speaking a related but different language.

All the Obanliku varieties are very much in use by people of all ages during village meetings, church services and in informal domains. Because English is currently filling the role of the language of literature in the Obanliku communities, middle-aged women and the elderly are cut off from personal access to literature, including the Scriptures. Furthermore, since the Obanliku people carry out most of their lives in their own language, it seems it is when the Scriptures are translated into Obanliku that God's word will most impact their lives. Their oral translation of Scripture readings in church suggests they already believe so.

Of all the Obanliku varieties, Bisu was rated by the people as the easiest to speak and understand after their own variety, followed by Busi, Bishiri, Bebi and Basang.

In terms of lexical similarity, Bisu, Bishiri and Bebi were found to be the most similar to each other. Basang is the most different variety among the five (though its shared vocabulary with the other four is between 76% and 78%). Busi is in between the most similar and the most different.

In terms of comprehension, generally the people reported they can understand one another. However Bebi and Bishiri children were reported to not understand Basang. Also Busi children were said to lack understanding of Bebi. The results of intelligibility testing confirmed lower intelligibility of Basang than of the rest of the varieties. Among the five varieties, only Basang stands out as clearly different based

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10 Informal domains include at home, farm, playground or football pitch; with parents, grandparents, siblings, brothers and sisters, children, relations, friends/age-mates, spouses; for prayers, courtship, scolding children, etc.
on a 75% cut-off for minimum acceptable comprehension. Speakers of all five varieties averaged 85% or higher on our tests in Busi, Bebi, Bisu and Bishiri, which is consistent with their claims to understand each other. Busi children may have difficulty understanding Bebi generally, but they did not demonstrate any difficulty understanding the particular Bebi story that we recorded.

The group interviews and participatory methods indicate that the people desire to see a written form of their varieties developed. Besides their own dialect they also accepted the possibility of reading and writing in other varieties. However, in Bayaluga (a Bebi village), they specified that, apart from their own dialect, they would only be willing to read and write in Bisu or Bishiri.

Obanliku church leaders desire to have the Bible translated into Obanliku. They said their churches would set up a translation committee; provide funds, food and accommodation; give verbal support; and pray to aid the translation team and project. The clergymen suggested names of individuals in the area who could serve as translators and literacy workers. They also said their denominations would be willing to work in collaboration with other Christian denominations on a translation project in Obanliku.

Given that only a few Obanliku speakers (mostly old people) were reported to understand or speak Bette, and none of the people were willing to read and write in Bette, we can say that the Bette Bible would not sufficiently serve all Obanliku people.

We, the surveyors, recommend that Bisu would seem the best choice for development into a standard written Obanliku. We support that choice since Bisu was reported by the people as easiest to speak and the most widely understood. The people preferred Bisu and Bishiri for literacy. These two varieties are the most lexically similar and best understood by all the subjects tested. Either could be chosen as a reference dialect for a language development programme in Obanliku. It is in line with best practice to go with the people’s choice after they have agreed among themselves.
References


