

IBIBIO LOAN-WORDS IN ENGLISH LEXICON: HISTORICAL ORIGIN AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS (1)

Thomas Thomas

Department of History and International Studies

University of Uyo, Uyo

udomakpanumoren@yahoo.com

08029300123

Abstract

There are words which are of Ibibio origin found in contemporary English lexicon. These words are probably loan-words or derivatives from Ibibio vocabulary. Thus, the crux of this paper is to ascertain their roots and trace their probable routes to the English lexicon, and also embark on a comparative analysis between them and the Ibibio equivalents. To ascertain the Ibibioness or not of the words, the paper will compare and contrast them and also examine their phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and etymological meanings in a bid to commenting on the nexus and open a floodgate for further researches. Historical analytical methodology has been adopted for this study. The findings and conclusion have shown that the English language borrows from the Ibibio language in the last 600 years.

Keywords: Loanwords, English, Ibibio, Etymology, History

1.0 Introduction

The Ibibio is the language spoken by the people occupying the geopolitical expression called Akwa Ibom State, and the Southern part of Cross River State in Nigeria. A dialect of the language (Efik) is spoken by the people occupying Calabar municipality, Calabar South, Akpabuyo, Odukpani, Bakasi, Biase and Akamkpa Local Government Areas of Cross River State – Although the last two local government areas have a somewhat different languages of the Ekoid group; but Ibibio is their lingua franca.¹

The Ibibio language and the English language belong to different language families. The former belongs to the Benue-Congo sub-family which in turn belongs to the Niger-Congo phylum, one of the largest families of languages in Africa.² Under the generic classification, Ibibio belongs to the Lower Cross group, and Efik, Annang, Oron, Ekid, Ikono, Nkari, etc. are all

dialects of the language.³ On the other hand, English language belongs to the Indo-European family of languages. Thus, it is related to most other languages spoken in Europe and the West Asia from Iceland to India.⁴

The Ibibio people and their language have had contact with the Europeans as far back as 1472 when the Portuguese landed at the Gulf of Guinea, around the shores of Calabar, Ikot Abasi and Eket. They came as explorers, and subsequently as slave merchants.⁵ The Portuguese and their Spanish brothers dominated the Gulf of Guinea for more than two centuries until other European powers, especially the British, stepped in and dealt on slaves up to about 1835 when the English abolitionists and missionaries came to this part of the world.⁶

These earlier contacts between the Ibibio and the British had probably caused the two groups to borrow some words from each other. The British introduced their language deliberately to the Ibibio people, while some Ibibio words may have entered the English lexicon through unavoidable social circumstances.⁷ This paper looks at some words in English vocabulary which are of Ibibio origin.

2.0 The Intimidating Profile of the English Language

The profile of the English language appears too intimidating such that it has become almost impossible to believe that any African nation has lent her words to the English to boost their language. This is because in the hierarchical ordering of world top ten languages, the English language takes the first position considering its spread to practically all parts of the world because of its flexibility, fascination and ready adaptability to new environment.⁸

Eka postulates that:

The present century has witnessed one of the most significant events in the history of the English Language – a phenomenal spread. From England (its original home), English has expanded to nearly all parts of the globe. This expansion is traceable to the migration of English-speaking people of various classes; missionaries, colonizers, traders, members of various volunteer organizations as well as those in search of adventure.⁹

It is a truism that as English speaking people migrate to alien environments some foreign words entered their language. Majority of these words are the ones with no equivalent in the English language. Hence, as time passed by they adopted and/or anglicized them, and added to their lexicon. This is why Eka submits that one factor that has pervaded all periods in the changing phases of English, and has itself been an important issue in the changes, is borrowing.¹⁰ According to Eka,

While it is true that loan words exist in practically all natural languages, it is equally true that they are particularly numerous in English. They are known to have come into English through trade, navigation, space travel, missionary activities, among others, but also particularly from the numerous invaders who brought into the English environment new lexical and general vocabulary items.¹¹

Also, Dryden, in a dedication to his translation of the *Aeneid* (1697), according to Eka, averred thus:

I trade both with the living and the dead, for the enrichment of our native tongue. We have enough in England to supply our necessity, but if we will have things of magnificence and splendor, we must get them by commerce.¹²

So, getting words from other languages to enrich self has been one of the characteristics of the English language from its evolutionary stage. Trask posits that English speakers have long been among the most enthusiastic borrowers of other people's words on earth, and many, many thousands of English words have been acquired in just this way.¹³ He argues that some people are so eager to borrow words from others because such words are names of something genuinely new to speakers of the borrowing language;¹⁴ and further avers that;

Indeed, if you leaf through the pages of an English dictionary that provides the sources of words, you will discover that well over half the words in it are taken from other languages in one way or another.¹⁵

In this regards, Eka notes, over 120 languages are known to have served as sources for the present vocabulary of the English language.¹⁶ He goes on to state that since 1950, a fresh wave of borrowing has been taking place which eventually may exceed the total known during the middle English period. He submits therefore that "the emergence of English as a world language has increased its contacts with new languages and cultures and borrowings have shown a dramatic increase."¹⁷ Eka also includes Nigeria as one of the sources from which the English borrowed from, and mentions *Ibibio* words borrowed along other Nigerian words by the English language.¹⁸ This is why Sonny Samson-Akpan asserts that every so called international language, including English, French, Romans, Greeks, Germans and others borrowed profusely from Africa.¹⁹

3.0 The Contributions of The *Ibibio* Language to the Development of English Vocabulary

That some English vocabulary are of *Ibibio* origin should not be in doubt, considering the fact that the English language thrives on borrowed

words, and the fact that these two languages have had contacts for about 600 years now. A critical study of both the English and the Ibibio languages revealed evidence of semantic, morphological and syntactic near equivalence. This confirms Offiong's postulation that:

When there is language contact, there is bound to be cross-linguistic influence at all levels of language, including lexical borrowing and code-mixing, particularly on the part of the bilingual.²⁰

There are some words and phrases in the English language that have semblances in semantics, morphology, syntax and phonology with the Ibibio language. These words are etymologically of the Ibibio origin, as this study revealed. They are believed to have found their ways into the English lexicon in the, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries,²¹ even though some scholars, especially of the Eurocentric leaning, may argue to the contrary.

4.0 Slave Trade: The Ibibio Words Possible Route to the English Lexicon

Although there are other avenues through which the Ibibio words may have entered the English vocabulary, but slave trade seems to be the first or original route through which that happened. The English traders found their way to Ibibio land around 1500AD, soon after Christopher Columbus discovered America and the new world, and the demand for Labour to work in the English farms and factories became high in the new world; thus, they joined the Portuguese and the Spaniards in the business of exploring Africa, especially the Western part, for slaves. Their exploration took them to the Ibibio shores where they bought slaves in their number. A publication sponsored in 2005 by the West African Museums programme (WAMP), Dakar, Senegal for the National Museum, Uyo, Nigeria, Notes that:

Historians have noted that the seventeenth century when Ibibio coastal areas were hooked to the international traffic in slaves on a regular basis, two important developments are usually mentioned. These include the discovery of the new world and the Europeans plantations' need of labour, which the Americans, Indians and Europeans could not satisfy.²²

Blassingame also reports that slaves of Ibibio origin were among those taken to the new world and America to work on the British farms.²³ Reich maintains that "it was only the demand for labour in the New World that triggered the modern slave trade that was eventually to bring an estimated 11-15 million Africans to the Americas. He further states that of these, almost 2 million were sold to the British colonies, with about 80 percent going to the West Indies."²⁴ This earlier contact warranted the Ibibio

middlemen to refer to the English traders as *om̄onik̄osi*, a corruption of “How much does it cost?”, a name derived from the English bargaining Parlance.²⁵ So, on getting to the New World, the Ibibio slaves must have communicated with their masters initially through a code-mixed English-Ibibio. However, the slave masters/owners were probably forced to learn some words from the language spoken by their slaves in a bid to dictate their moves because some of the slaves outrightly refused to speak the English language. In the words of Blassingame, some Africans consistently refused to abandon their linguistic tie with their homeland. When newly imported Africans were on large plantations where they had little contact with Whites and thus needed to use a European language, they were remarkably successful in retaining elements of their native language.

As the number of African-born slaves increased, a patois containing English and African words developed in the quarters.²⁸

Although at some points, slave owners had to heterogenized the slaves in order to stop free flow of communication; thus, slaves of diverse ethnic groups were mixed.²⁹ It is pertinent to submit that majority of the Ibibio words may have entered the English lexicon through the American flank, during the slave trade era. This noticeable entrants of Ibibio words into the English lexicon probably was the reason why Olderdorps undertook

German	English	Moko	Ibibio
Ein	One	Kia	keed
Zwei	Two	Iba	Iba
Drei	Three	Ita	Ita
Vier	Four	Inang	Inang
Funf	Five	Uttin	Ittion
Secha	Six	Itjuckee	Itiokeet
Sieben	Seven	Itiaba	Itiaba
Acht	Eight	Itteiata	Itiaita
Neun	Nine	Huschukiet	Usukeet
Zen	Ten	Dub	Duop
Got	God	Abassi	Abasi

Source: Noah, M. E. *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History*. Uyo: Scholars press, 1980 p.3.

a painstaking research in comparative linguistics between Ibibio language and Moko language spoken in the then British controlled slave colonies in Europe.³⁰ According to Northrup, Moko is a corrupt Ibibio language spoken by the Blacks in Europe and America. Vocabularies of Moko Language collected by Oldendorps show clearly that it was the language of the Ibibio-speaking peoples.³¹ Below is Olderdorp's specimen of Moko vocabulary in Europe.

From Olderdorp's effort, it could be deduced here that Ibibio words may have entered the English vocabulary through the interaction between Ibibio slaves and their English masters in Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

5.0 List of Ibibio-Loan Words in English Lexicon

Ibibio	Meaning in Ibibio	English	Meaning in English
<i>Tap</i>	To hit somebody/something quickly and lightly.	Tap	To hit somebody/something quickly and lightly.
<i>Mma/ma</i>	Mother	Ma	Mother
<i>Samba</i>	A kind of dance originated from the Riverine Ibibio people.	Samba	A kind of dance common among blacks in Brazil
<i>Fan/ufan</i>	Be friend/friend	Fan	Friend
<i>Arit</i>	A name given to a first female child in the family.	Harriet ³⁶	A name given to a first female child in the family.
<i>Amanda</i>	One who loves support. It can be given as a name to both male and female children. (ama (lover) nda (support))	Amanda ³⁷	Since the name did not originate from the English, they do not know the meaning. However, Webster Advanced Learners Dictionary (1994) edition defines it as a female given name.
<i>Amayo</i>	Only a lover tolerates (one's inadequacies)	Amaya ³⁸	Since the name did not originate from the English, they do not know the meaning. However, Webster Advanced Learners Dictionary (1994) edition defines it as a female given name.

Ibibio	Meaning in Ibibio	English	Meaning in English
<i>Se</i>	Look at	See	Look at
<i>Se mi</i>	Look at me	See me	Look at me
<i>Kan</i>	Be able	Can	Be able
<i>Mien</i>	One's appearance (that is, a person announcing his appearance). E.g <i>Se mien mi</i> (here am I)	Mien	A person's appearance
<i>De</i>	To be brave enough to do something. E.g <i>De nam ise</i> (dare do it and see)	Dare	To be brave enough to do something.
<i>Amanam ana</i> <i>/Amana³⁹</i>	A religious and communal cooperative society	Amana ⁴⁰	A religious and communal cooperative society.

Also, Hugh Crow, a veteran trader who plied both the West African Coast and the West Indies, wrote of his exploits and experiences and stating that, besides the Igbo and Breches (sic), the European slave traders received negroes of several other nations, including Ibibio.³¹ Blassingame confirms that

Most of the Africans brought to North America were members of agrarian polities in West Africa... A majority of them belonged to the Ibo, Ewe, Biafada (sic) Bakongo, Wolof, Bambara, Ibibio, Serer, and Arada peoples.³²

These slaves were owned by Englishmen, and were, at the early stage, unable to speak and understand English, the language of their masters. Thus, they spoke their language or a mixture of their native language and the English, which is the reason some words of African origin are found in the English language, especially in the American English.³³ Blassingame avers that as fresh Africans were imported during the eighteenth century, however, some African linguistic patterns were retained by Blacks even when they spoke English.³⁴

6.0 Comparative Analysis of Ibibio Loan-words in English Lexicon

The above listed words are pronounced the same way both in English and in Ibibio. Some are spelt exactly the same way, while some are spelt slightly different. For instance, “tap” is spelt the same in both Ibibio and English and its phonetic inscription is the same. The word “samba” is spelt and pronounced the same way. “Fan” is so spelt in both languages, and the phonetic inscription is the same. “Amanda” is spelt and pronounced the same way. It should be noted that “Amana” is a name given to a male child

born during the father's second or third seclusion rite of *Inam* cult in Ibibio land.

However, there are words in the above list that are not spelt the same way, but are pronounced almost the same way,⁴¹ except “se mi”/ “see me”. These happen because the English, just like the Ibibio language, has a way of modifying foreign words to conform with/to its phonological and morphological patterns,⁴² especially if the so called foreign words are of a language that belongs to different language families.⁴³ Except on very rare cases, the first noticeable fact is that when a new noun enters Ibibio lexicon, the initial letter of such noun would be changed to a vowel since every noun in Ibibio begins with a vowel. Thus, every English word in Ibibio begins with a vowel. Every English word in Ibibio vocabulary is modified by undergoing initial vowel insertion to become acceptable as a word in the Ibibio language.⁴⁴

However, the English modified some Ibibio words or some words from the Niger-Congo phylum by tampering with their morphological structures. This is done through affixations or syntactic modifications. For example, “Obongship” (Obong + ship) – “Obong” being Ibibio word for a king, and “ship” connoting the institution of *Obong* in Ibibioland. Hence, if an English man wants to speak on the institution or process of selecting an *Obong* in Ibibioland, he would say “the *Obongship* in Ibibioland”. In the early colonial era, the British adopted “Obong of Calabar” as a title for the ruler of Efik (a dialectal group of the Ibibio). The phrase “Obong of “is English and not Ibibio. This is one reason why David Eka mentions “Obong” as one of the words borrowed from Nigeria by the English.⁴⁵

So, many English words, especially the borrowed ones, are built up by the addition of an affix to a simple root. It is observed that some loan words in English vocabulary, including some with apparent Ibibio origin, have affixes placed either at the beginning of the words (prefixes), or at the end of them (suffixes), or at both ends.⁴⁶ For example, the word “emanate” which seems to be derived from the Ibibio verb “man” which means “give birth to” or “to give birth”, is affixed at the beginning and at the end – *e-man-ate* – to mean “to give birth” or “to originate” in English.⁴⁷

7.0 Likely Ibibio Words with New Meanings in English Lexicon

There are some words in the English lexicon that are likely of Ibibio origin because of their phonemes and spellings which correspond almost exactly with similar words in the Ibibio language. It is most likely that those words originated from African slaves of Ibibio extraction in the English plantations, but however acquired new meanings in the English Lexicon.

Words like “item” (but means advice in Ibibio, but means “a separate article, or a piece of information” in English); “døk” means unearth (in Ibibio)), and sounds like English word “dug” which is a past tense of “dig” (to unearth); “Inuen” bird (in Ibibio), “innuendo (speaking indirectly like a bird).⁴⁸ Some of these words are pronounced differently in both languages, and represent different sets of ideas in the two languages under comparison. However, some scholars view these words as mere coincidental. Trask postulates that:

It's all very well for me to say that a word has changed meaning over time. But beyond our own experiences, how can we tell? The answer, as with so much historical linguistics, is that we don't know, in the sense that I know my home telephone number. What we can do, however, is combine a solid theoretical understanding of how language changes with, wherever possible, a corpus with both historical depth and synchronic breath. From this we can, with considerable accuracy, construct a model for how the meaning of a particular word or phrase changed.⁴⁹

8.0 Etymology of the Word “Enema” in English Lexicon

The word “enema” is by all standards etymologically of Ibibio origin. The word, both in spelling and semantics, is Ibibio. And the medical act is traditionally Ibibio nay African. The word is a name of a person. There is a legend which is woven around the name. Ibibio Legend has it that there once was a very gigantic glutton called Eneama (or Enema) who was equally very powerful and was always hired as mercenary to fight wars. A lot of people knew that his kind of food (carbohydrate) gave him so much power to fight, but when other warriors attempted to eat like him, they fell sick and died. Little did they know that Enema was always cleansing his bowel at the wee hour of everyday before he ate for the day.⁵⁰

One day, his “tricks” was uncovered, and his people began to use his action (bowel cleansing) in an adage, thus: *dia kebe sio nte Eneama*. (Literary meaning “eat and flush out like Eneama”).⁵¹

Enema is said to have done so everywhere he was hired to. He probably must have introduced that act to the Egyptians on one of his military contracts. It seems, however, that the act of cleansing the bowel which hitherto was unknown to the Western and Middle Eastern worlds became known as Enema because it was introduced by the Ibibio warriors or probably by Enema himself. Aye posits that *ukebe* (enema) originated from the Efiks (a group in Ibibio). As at 1786, a diarists of Efik descent had documented enema (*ukebe*); and his assertions align with the Ibibio legend on enema.⁵²

According to Wikipedia, enema entered the English language about C. 1675 from Latin. The source further asserts that the first mention of the enema in medical literature is in the ancient Egyptian Ebers Papyrus (C.1550 BCE).⁵³ It is likely that the Egyptians got the idea of clyster from the legendary Enema, and sold the idea and the legend to the Latins who in turn sold it to the English.

Viewing from the nomenclatural perspective, one cannot doubt the possibility of the Ibibio origin of the word and, of course, the medical act known as enema, especially considering the fact that the British prior to this era disapproved any form of clyster (their new name for enema), and also considering that the English language has a way of creating new words to name previous non-existent objects or phenomena that result from cultural contact.⁵⁴ Ndimele asserts that

Invented trade names such as Xerox and Kleenex are recent additions to the English language. They have quickly become everyday words in the language. The word Xerox used to refer only to a company that produces a type of photocopying machine. Recently, the word has come to be used to refer to the process of photocopying in general. Also the Kleenex used to refer to a brand of facial tissue, but now it has come to denote facial tissue in general.⁵⁵

Therefore, enema is adopted into the English language in a way Xerox and Kleenex are; and in the same way crane – a name of a long necked bird – is used as a name of a heavy-duty machine with a long neck as crane (bird) used in lifting heavy objects.⁵⁶

9.0 Conclusion

The Ibibio words found in the English lexicon apparently entered the English language from the American and West Indies flanks through the slave trade in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This paper, however, has attempted to “unravel” the unbelievable fact that the Ibibio language – a language spoken in the extreme southern corner of Nigeria, too, has lent some words to the most popular language in the world, the English. Although, Euro-centricity may cause some scholars to refute this fact, the truth remains that there are some Ibibio words in the English vocabulary.

Endnotes

¹ Okon Essien, *A Grammar of the Ibibio Language* (Ibadan: University Press Plc. 2008), P. ix.

² *Ibid*, p.5

³ *Ibid*, p.5

⁴ David Eka, *From Changes to Divergences: Reflections on Global Englishes*. 13th Inaugural Lectures of the University of Uyo. September 29, 2005. P. 1

⁵ Otoabasi Akpan, *An Introduction to the Modern Gulf of Guinea: History, People, Political Economy and Strategic Future* (Calabar: Triple Star Printing Press Ltd. 2010), P. 24. See also Thomas Thomas, "Ibibio Etymology I" (A researched paper accepted for publication in a Festschrift in honour of Okuku (Prof.) Jonathan Udoeyop. History of Slave Trade in Ibibioland. Uyo: National Museum. 2005. P. 15.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ Offiong Ani Offiong, "Languages in Contact: The Case of Efik and English", In *Language and Culture in Nigeria: Festschrift for Professor Okon Essien* (Aba: National Institute for Nigerian Languages 2004) P.98.

⁸ Eka, *From Changes to Divergences*, P. 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*. p.26

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 26

¹² Cited by Eka, David in the above referenced work p. 26

¹³ Trask's *Historical Linguistics* (2nd edition) Revised and edited ^{14b} Robert McColl Miller. London: Hodder Arnold. 2007 p.22.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.22.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.22

¹⁷ Eka, *From Changes to Divergences* P. 26

¹⁸ *Ibid*. p.27

Ibid. p. 30

¹⁹ Sonny Samson – Akpan. "Writing and Teaching in Ibibio: A survey". A paper presented at the First Workshop on the teaching of the Ibibio Language at the University of Cross River State, Uyo, 11th May, 1988

²⁰ Interview with Chief J. B. Ituen, Retired Principal of Secondary Schools in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Chief Ituen studied in Texas Southern University, USA for his BA and MA degrees in Geography and History respectively. As at the time of the interview he was 87 years old.

²¹ Offiong, "Languages in Contact", P. 98.

²² *History of Slave Trade in Ibibioland*. A publication of National Museum, Uyo, Nigeria. Sponsored by West African Museum Programme,

Dakar, Senegal, 2005 . 15.

²³ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community – Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (Oxford University Press, Inc. 1979), P.5.

²⁴ Jerome R. Reich, *Colonial America* (Prentice-Hall. 2001) p. 123.

²⁵ Monday E. Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigeria History*. (Uyo: Scholars Press, 1980), p.3.

²⁶ Blassingame, *The slave Community*, p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibid*. p. 25

²⁸ *Ibid*. p. 26

²⁹ Okon E. Uya, *African Diaspora and the Black Experience in the New World Slavery* (Calabar: Clear Lines Publications. 2005) P. 81.

³⁰ C. G. A. Olderdorps, *Geschichte der evangelischen Bruder auf den carabischen Inseln*. Barby. 1 777. Pp. 345-347

³¹ David, Northrup, "New Light form Old Sources: Pre-colonial References to the Anang Ibibio", *Ikenga*, Vol. 2 No.1 January, 1973. P. 5

³² *Memoirs of the Late Captain Hugh Crow*. London. 1830. Pp. 270-286.

³³ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p.5

³⁴ *Ibid*. p. 25

³⁵ *Ibid*. p.30

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.30

³⁷ *Ibid* , p.31

³⁸ *Ibid* , p.30

³⁹ *Ibid* , p.30

⁴⁰ *Ibid* , p.30

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.30

⁴² Thomas Thomas, "Ibibio Etymology 1". (This paper has been accepted for publication in a Festschrift in Honour of Okuku (Prof.) Jonathan Udoeyop).

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

⁴⁵ Eka, *From Changes to Divergences*, p.30.

⁴⁶ Ozo-Mekuri Ndimele, *Morphology and Syntax*. Port Harcourt. M & J Grand Orbit Communications Ltd. 1999. P. 22

⁴⁷ Although the English claim that the word "emanate" is derived from Greek; but a deeper study of the verb "man" shows that the word is Ibibio in origin because viewing through the Ibibio perspective gives the word more weight and meaning than viewing from the Greek perspective.

⁴⁸ See Webster's New Universal unabridged Dictionary 1994.

⁴⁹ *Trask's Historical Linguistics* (2nd Edition) revised and edited by Robert McColl Millar. London: Hodder Arnold 2007. P.54.

⁵⁰ Thomas Thomas, *Ibibio Warelores and Legends* (An unpublished Manuscripts). p. 300

⁵¹ *Ibid* p. 301

⁵² E. U. Aye, *The Efik People* (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press limited. 2000), P. 147

⁵³ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> .

⁵⁴ Ndimele, *Morphology and Syntax*, P. 69

⁵⁵ *Ibid* p. 69

⁵⁶ *Ibid* p. 69.

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