Medefaidrin Spirit Language: Revealed but Influenced

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1. Language creativity and language creation

Creativity is one technique that language uses in propagating itself. It can take the form of literary works of poetry, prose and drama, as well as in of everyday language in speech. Such creative use of language has often resulted in new vocabulary registers in existing languages, based on novel experiences or innovative technology. Examples are the vocabularies of the information technologies, which have been integrated into existing word classes and graphemic and phonemic patterns in many languages. In the political arena, we daily find new creative uses of existing items in local and global languages. In Nigeria, for instance, we find T-shirts, buses and billboards with inscriptions such as "One-4-Eight" and "31 for 1" to advertise voting for a second term of office for the incumbent Governor of Akwa Ibom State, with the suggestion that all the 31 local government areas of Akwa Ibom State should support the incumbent Governor for this second term.

However, creativity is not limited to components of language such as vocabulary, but can apply to the creation of entire new languages. There have been many examples of such 'artificial' languages, the most well-known being Esperanto, first documented in 1887, which was motivated by internationalism. In contrast, the Medefaidrin language, spoken by a religious community in south-eastern Nigeria, was created as a spiritually revealed language motivated by religious concerns, but in general terms it has a similar status to Esperanto in being created by a single person. There was a wave of such activities, including the creation of new artificial languages for mathematics and logic, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Medefaidrin, created in 1927, is no exception. Each of these languages was influenced in some way by existing languages, Esperanto, for example, particularly by the vocabulary and grammar of the Romance languages. Medefaidrin has the status of a divinely inspired spirit language but, as we will show, the language is also influenced both by the enclaving Niger-Congo language Ibibio and by English.

Much of the current discussion in the fields of language description and documentation concentrates on language death. However, we are interested in the entire language birth, development, endangerment and death cycle. In order to capture this development we orient our work according to the Language Life-Cycle (LLC) model (Figure 1).
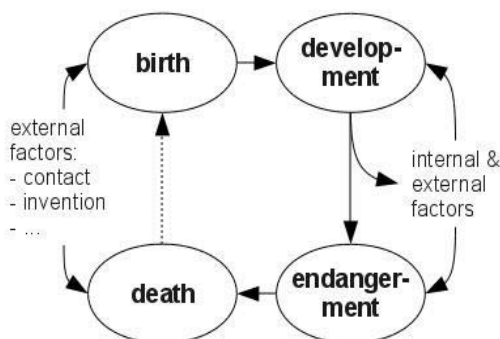

Figure 1: Language Life-Cycle (LLC) model: birth, (iterative) development, endangerment, death, re-birth.

The LLC shows relationships between language birth (by invention, as a pidgin, introduction of a new superstrate language, or as a consequence of long-term language change) through an expansion stage and a period of decline in status and speaker numbers, to disappearance or 'language death', with a potential for 'rebirth' by revival or, as noted, as a consequence of long-term language change. Medefaidrin provides an exceptional example of an almost complete LLC within a period of 80 years: it first appeared around 1927, was used increasingly within the community for many decades both in speech and writing, and is currently in a moribund state, with fewer and fewer speakers.

2. Medefaidrin: situation of the language

The Medefaidrin language is a special purpose language developed by a Christian group known as the 'Oberi Okaime Christian Mission' (the name of the community is sometimes written 'Obɛri Ɔkaimɛ'). The language was originally intended for religious purposes and to regulate the duties of the community, but has developed into more general usage for education and to some extent in everyday life. The Oberi Okaime adherents claim that the language was revealed to one of the the early founders of the church, Bishop Aikeld Ukpong (alias Michael Ukpong) on a 'spiritual board' visible only to the initiated, after having been taken into seclusion by the Holy Spirit, known as the 'Seminant' in Medefaidrin. Since Bishop Aikeld Ukpong was not literate, it fell on the Secretary of the group, Prophet Jakeld Udofia to transcribe the spiritual writings revealed in a vision to Bishop Ukpong. The details of this process of transfer and the relative contributions of the two men to the definition of Medefaidrin are not too clear.

The members of the Oberi Okaime church operate mainly in what is now known as Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Membership of the church is about two thousand both in Akwa Ibom State and in neighbouring Cross River State. The revelation theory of text creation is by no means unique to the Oberi Okaime religious group but it is prevalent in many religions across the world, including the Judaic and Christian traditions (in the Ten Commandments, and in fundamentalist Christian interpretations the entire Bible) and Islam (in the Holy Quran). There are also many examples of religiously motivated language creation (Cooper 1991; Dalby 1968). In the Judaic tradition, for example, it was the responsibility of Adam to name things, and there are parallels in other religions.

In each of these cases, the nexus is the connection between the revelation of language to a charismatic person such as a prophet, and its preservation in a writing system, often by another person. The Medefaidrin script follows this principle (Urua & Gibbon 2010).

As we have indicated elsewhere (Urua 2008), the Oberi Okaime members whose religious language is Medefaidrin have Ibibio (Lower Cross; ISO 639-3:ibb) as their first language. Therefore the language is not acquired naturally during early childhood from near relatives and peers according to innate principles, but is learned explicitly by church members from a teacher like a foreign language, and by 'learning by doing' like the vehicular languages of trade (e.g. pidgins), diplomacy and science.

Furthermore the Medefaidrin language was also used as a language of instruction in the various schools established by the Oberi Okaime group. The Oberi Okaime established their own schools, with the Medefaidrin language as a language of instruction rather than English, which was the mandatory language of formal western education in Nigeria during the colonial era. Because of their language policy the group faced intense persecution by the colonial government, who regarded Medefaidrin as a secret language and the Oberi Okaime community as subversive. The parallel education system was declared illegal and leaders and members of the community were imprisoned, publicly flogged or executed. Although the group were of Ibibio stock, they found no safe haven in the larger Ibibio community because the Oberi Okaime church condemned unhealthy traditional practices perpetuated by local chiefs and priests. With this double persecution, the Oberi Okaime community faced a lose-lose situation, but the language initially thrived nevertheless.

Later, the interest generated by the language and unique script of the Oberi Okaime community prompted the then colonial government to commission a study into Medefaidrin (Adams 1947). This initial impetus grew into other studies on the group (Hau 1961; Abasiattai 1989, 2008; Essien nd; Odofia 1953; Urua 2008; Gibbon & Urua 2010). But as a result of persecutions from all sides, the movement, which had attracted numerous members from different walks of life, dwindled and went underground. Apart from the activities of the members and the sustained interest of researchers, in

particular Professor Monday Abasiattai, very little was heard about the Oberi Okaime group and their activities, until a situation was reached in which the language can be classed as endangered.

Around 1986, the Oberi Okaime members decided to start a revival of their activities and of the Medefaidrin language, based on the Medefaidrin script.[1] The approach adopted took the form of lessons in the language in Sunday School classes, albeit unstructured and ad hoc. But it was a place to begin to combat the hitherto progressive decline of the language. Beginning in 2008, researchers from the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Uyo, in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, in collaboration with colleagues in the Department of Computer Science, decided to offer assistance in the form of state-of-the-art documentation and the production of educational resources for the language.

3. The Medefaidrin script

The Medefaidrin language has its own script (see Figure 2 for examples of Medefaidrin documents), which is different from the roman script, though there are striking similarities. The Medefaidrin script is used for instruction in the religious doctrine of the group, a not uncommon development in 'spirit languages' (Cooper 1991; Dalby 1960).

Figure 2: Examples of Medefaidrin documents (starting top left, clockwise): extract from a medefaidrin diary (scan); optical enhancement of diary scan; commentary on marginalia of diary entry; lower case characters; upper case characters; numerals; optically enhanced scan of rule book.

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[1] Personal communication from members of the Oberi Okaime community.

4. The Medefaidrin language

Our interest in this paper is not so much on the origins and history of the group but to focus on the structure of the language itself in an attempt to unearth the complexities embedded in the language and thereby to discover the creative achievements involved in language genesis in a language contact situation. Consequently, we turn our attention to a brief account of these aspects rather than delving further into the sociolinguistic and anthropological background. The focus of investigation is thus to find out the sources of the origin of the Medefaidrin language. In doing so, we shall discuss the language contact situation and the effects of such a situation on the language.

Our main language consultant for the project is Reverend Richmel Ekit, with additional materials from Mrs Ofonmbuk Inyang and her husband Chief Ime Inyang. Our primary data consist of wordlists, handwritten Medefaidrin texts, and recent audio and video recordings of Oberi Okaime religious activities (not dealt with directly in the present study). Secondarily, some data is harvested from the small existing body of literature on Medefaidrin.

Medefaidrin is documented in some detail by Urua (2008) and Gibbon & Urua (2010). In this overview we provide illustrations of selected features of Medefaidrin which are relevant for discussion of the language contact situation and the LLC model.

Although the Medefaidrin speakers claim that the language was revealed on a 'spiritual board' by the Holy Spirit (the 'Seminant' in Medefaidrin), a close scrutiny of the language reveals several elements from other languages, not only Ibibio but also English.

Medefaidrin, like other artificial languages, is on the one hand a special purpose language, but on the other hand, like natural languages, it has a classic 'architecture' organised at phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic and text structural levels, with conventional semantic and phonetic interpretation principles.

As already noted, Medefaidrin has its own unique script, for which transliterations in roman script have been developed (Adams 1947). A examples of Medefaidrin script are shown in Figure 2. Table 1 shows the characters of the Medefaidrin alphabet in roman transliterations.

Table 1: Medefaidrin grapheme inventory (transliterations).

	Consonant symbols (24)	*Vowel symbols (8)*
Upper case:	M S V W ATU Z KP P T G F K J B C L Q H Ñ X D N R Y	I A E U YU Ö Ī O
Lower case:	m s v w atu z kp p t g f k j b c l q h n x d n r y	i a e u yu ö ī o

There are several similarities between the Medefaidrin and Ibibio grapheme and phoneme inventories, which is to be expected from the language contact situation and to some extent from universal inventory preference principles (for details of Ibibio, see Urua 2000, 2004). The similar sounds are /p, kp, t, k, b, d, m, n, f, s, w, j, r, i, a, e, ɔ, o, u/; labial-velars, which are characteristic of the phonetic typology of neighbouring languages, are included in this set.

Medefaidrin syllable structure may contain consonant clusters as in *seminant* 'holy spirit', *emsor* 'mortar'. Voiced consonants are common, as in *ruzerd* 'west'.

In relation to prosody, Medefaidrin currently appears to have lexical, perhaps also morphological tones, though in its earliest stages it was described as a stress language. Adams (1947:26) claimed, twenty years after the inception of the language, that Medefaidrin was a stress language, describing his perception of Medefaidrin as "sounding like someone preaching in a high pitched voice".

Table 2: Medefaidrin noun plural inflection.

Singular	*Plural*	*Gloss*
drin	*drins*	*word(s)*
dyup	*dyups*	*thing(s)*
anigrein	*anigreins*	*friend(s)*

In Medefaidrin morphology, the category Number is attested, with Singular unmarked and Plural marked by suffix (Table 2). Word formation by affixation in various patterns is a common feature of Medefaidrin. The syntactic categories Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Pronoun, Preposition, Conjunction are attested, including both lexical and grammatical categories (see Table 3).

Table 3: Aspects of Medefaidrin grammar.

Derivation:	Prefixation:	*dinet* 'person', *sakdinet* 'African'
	Suffixation:	*ponk* 'ask', *ponkixio* 'question'
	Infixation:	*mefunsy*, 'good morning', *meyafunsy* 'response'
Lexical Categories:	Nouns/pronouns:	*emsor* 'mortar', *gias* '1 pl obj'
	Verbs:	*primol* 'like/love'
	Adjectives:	*yanod* 'new'
	Adverb:	*osprid* 'quickly'
Grammatical categories:	Prepositions:	*dfe* 'of', *dio* 'on', *kin* 'in'
	Conjunctions:	*arien* 'and'

Medefaidrin has a standard word order of SVO followed by adverbials:

Atiu	*xtran*	*zu*	*dopitel*	*maghrn*
I	walk	to	school	everyday

5. Revelation and Language Contact

The two factors involved in an artificial language, being developed by revelation or inspiration and at the same time showing language contact phenomena, are not incompatible. In Medefaidrin, conspicuous similarities with Ibibio and English are found in the available textual materials, which has called for a re-examination of their language, their structure and their content in order to gain evidence about the possible sources of the language (Gibbon & Urua 2010).

The Oberi Okaime Christian Church comprised people who had themselves been members of the mainstream Christian churches (The Church of Scotland Mission, the Qua Iboe Church, etc.) in the early 20th century. This scenario clearly encourages a language contact situation with the Ibibio language and culture, and with the Christian religion, which is hard to ignore, both in the development of the Oberi Okaime religious practices and its special language, Medefaidrin. In view of the dominant colonial practices both in education and in religious ministry, considerable exposure to English may also be expected.

On the Ibibio side: Oberi Okaime church services are conducted only on the 'Etaha' day, regardless of which day that falls on. The Etaha day is the traditional worship day of the Ibibio speaking peoples. Moreover, as noted above, the days, months and years are observed in consonance with Ibibio traditional practices.

On the colonial and missionary influenced English side, the religious practice is clearly Christian, with a belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the administering of baptism and the other basic sacraments of the Christian church. It is therefore difficult to expect the Medefaidrin language to be a language *sui generis* which is completely without the effects of contact with other languages.

6. Possible influence from English

Medefaidrin syllable structure is more complex than that of Ibibio and more like English, with consonant clusters as in *seminant* 'holy spirit', *emsor* 'mortar' which are not attested in Ibibio except in loan words. Voiced obstruents, including voiced affricates, are present, whereas Ibibio, the mother tongue of Medefaidrin speakers, has few paired voiced obstruents, and no voiced fricatives. In contrast, the English phonological system is replete with paired voiceless and voiced phonemes. Examples of voiced obstruents are found in the following words: *ruzerd* 'drive/ride', *dge* 'the', *puized* 'west'. Medefaidrin also has more complex consonant clusters than Ibibio, though not more complex than English: *osprid* 'quickly', *primol* 'like/love', *fenslet* 'forgive', *dabt* 'cup'.

In the case of a word like *osprid*, it could be argued that the influence could be from either Ibibio or English since one of the very few consonant clusters attested in Ibibio is the Cr type as exemplified in words like the following: *bre* 'be dark', *frɔ* 'jump'. Be that as it may, we argue that this particular influence is more likely to come from English because even though Ibibio attests Cr sequences, there

are no *pr* sequences. In English, on the other hand, *pr* sequences occur, as in 'prince', 'price', 'prick', 'pray'.

In relation to prosody, Medefaidrin in its earlier stages was apparently a stress language (Adams 1947). This contrasts with Ibibio, which has both lexical and morphological tone, and suggests a relationship with English.

Some obvious features characterising English morphology appear on closer examination of Medfaidrin morphology. These are in the areas of plural formation, nominalization and aspect marking. Medefaidrin plural marking is by suffixation of -*s*. The suffixation operation is very similar to plural suffixation in English, using -*s* (cf. also Table 3). In contrast, Ibibio has the preposed plural particle *mme*:

Medefaidrin:	*drin*	'word'	*drin + s*	'words'
	anigrein	'friend'	*anigrein + s*	'friends'
Ibibio:	*afia*	'trap'	*mme afia*	'traps'
	ubom	'canoe'	*mme ubom*	'canoes'

Word formation by suffixal derivation in Medefaidrin was illustrated in Table 3. Further examples are to be found in nominalisation, where Medefaidrin, like English, has suffixation (with suffixes which are largely very similar to those of English), while Ibibio typically has vowel or nasal prefixation (Table 4).

Table 4: English type Medefaidrin suffixal nominalisation, contrasted with prefixal nominalisation in Ibibio.

	Stem		Nominal	
Medefaidrin:	*indumine* V	'tempt'	*indiumine + xion*	'temptation'
	fonku V	'add'	*fonku + xion*	'addition'
	wini V	'agree'	*wini + xion*	'agreement'
	toton V	'multiply'	*tɔtɔn + ity*	'multiplication'
	vozen N	'neighbour'	*vozen + ism*	'neighbourliness'
Ibibio:	*man* V	'give birth'	*u + man*	'giving birth'
	fan V	'befriend'	*u + fan*	'friend'

The presence of -*ion*, -*ity* and -*ism* in these items strongly suggest English influences. An isolated example of possible Cameroonian French influence may be (rather speculatively) seen in *vozenism* 'neighbourliness': cf. French *voisin* 'neighbour'.

At the syntactic level, there are a number of possible sources of influence from English, one of which is shared by Ibibio. First, the SVO word order of Medefaidrin is hardly surprising. The language is at least partly a result of a language contact situation with two matrix languages, Ibibio and English, which results in two tendencies: simplified 'default' typological features tend to be prevalent, and the two matrix languages both have SVO word order.

Second, possible influences from English appear to come from grammatical categories. This is somewhat unusual, in that languages in contact generally borrow from the lexical categories in the matrix language rather than grammatical categories. For example, Medefaidrin seems to have distilled some grammatical forms from English, for instance *zu* 'to', while Ibibio has no preposition 'to'.

Third, Medefaidrin has prepositions, which are not characteristic of the typology of Ibibio and the neighbouring Lower Cross languages but are characteristic of English. Examples were shown in Table 3, and correlate with the lack of inflection beyond the category of Number (and case in pronouns). Fourth, as in English, but unlike Ibibio, there is a definite article *dge*.

Although text linguistic patterns are not generally included in typological discussions but left to literary and anthropological study, it is rather clear that there are likely English influences in the use of the written medium. Urua & Gibbon (2010) observed that the written form of Medefaidrin documents shows a strong resemblance to English font and layout conventions. For instance, several characters and numerals are similar to roman characters and numerals. Writing is from left to right on the page. and words are separated by spaces. Other punctuation marks such as comma and period follow the roman

style. However the question mark is different and is located before the beginning of the question, rather like the convention in Spanish.

7. Possible influence from Ibibio

The possible Ibibio influence on Medefaidrin seems to encompass both the Ibibio culture and the Ibibio language. The Oberi Okaime community is simultaneously a Christian religious group and also highly Ibibio-centric in the sense that many of its practices and doctrines are based on the Ibibio worldview and the organisational principles of Ibibio society, which are reflected in the vocabulary of Medfaidrin. For example, the Oberi Okaime calendar is based on the traditional Ibibio week, month and year, with an interesting binary structure: an eight (2 to the power of 3) day week, a thirty-two (2 to the power of 5) day month and a sixteen (2 to the power of 4) month year, making a five hundred and twelve (2 to the power of 9) day year, i.e. 40% longer than the standard calendar year. This contrasts with the seven day week, (approximately) thirty day month, twelve month year and three hundred and sixty-five day year of the standard calendar. The difference is at least partly ascribable to the Nigerian seasonal cycles, which are less marked than the European seasons.

Other apparent influences from Ibibio occur in the counting system, in the worship day, and in names for the days of the week and months of the year.

Urua (2000, 2004) provides a detailed account of Ibibio phonology and phonetics. Possible phonetic and phonological influences from Ibibio include doubly articulated labial velar stops, a feature which is not found in European languages such as English. In the Medefaidrin alphabet we find the voiceless labial-velar stop [kp]. The voiced counterpart [gb] is absent, and, interestingly, Ibibio also attests only the voiceless labial-velar stop without the voiced counterpart [gb].

At the prosodic level, preliminary results of prosodic analysis seem to show that Medefaidrin over the years may have shifted from a stress language to be more like a tone language, under the influence of the Ibibio matrix language, based on examination of audio and video recordings spanning the period from 2008 to 2010.

Medefaidrin morphology bears in some respects a striking resemblance to similar forms in Ibibio. It appears that Medefaidrin in several cases borrows an Ibibio root or stem and modifies it accordingly in its English type suffixal word formation process (Table 5).

Table 5: Ibibio root borrowings in Medefaidrin derivations.

Ibibio	Gloss	Medefaidrin	Gloss
tɔt	multiply	tɔtɔnity	multiplication
edip	twenty	editi	twenty
edip-mme-duop	thirty (lit., twenty and ten)	ediparid (twenty and ten)	thirty
Ita	three	seta	three
Ata	sixty	setado	sixty
ata-mme-ita	sixty-three (lit., sixty and three)	setadoseta	sixty-three (lit., sixty and three)

8. Conclusions

It is a well established fact in language studies that languages influence one another in a language contact situation leading to pidgins, creoles and different languages altogether. Various theories have been proposed for the development of these hybrid languages including polygenetic and monogenetic. Our research shows that apart from the 'revelation' origin of Medefaidrin, from a linguistic perspective there are obvious similarities with other languages, documenting external influences based on contact with the Ibibio language as well as contact with the English language. The Ibibio contact situation is not hard to explain, since Ibibio is the mother tongue of Medefaidrin speakers, and Medefaidrin has a kind of vehicular function with respect to religious and educational practices. The English influence is not quite so straightforward. The originator of Medefaidrin is said to have been illiterate, and the remark by Adams that the prosody of Medefaidrin sounds like preaching suggests that contact with English was primarily with charismatic missionary preachers, whose intonation and stress patterns were a model for Medefaidrin prosody. If the originator was illiterate, then presumably he was at least assisted by literate colleagues.

Consequently, we come to the conclusion that the revelation or inspiration factor was influenced by the experience of and exposure to at least two external culture and language sources. In the case of language, the influences can be documented at several levels, including phonology, morphology, syntax and text structure. There is a need for a closer scrutiny and study of the Medefaidrin language and its script within the context of the Language Life-Cycle model, particularly with regard to the endangerment phase, in order to reveal further insights into the factors involved in the birth, development, endangerment and death of languages. What can be said at the moment in terms of the LLC model is that the language birth phase was by invention involving one individual; development proceeded under the influence of Ibibio and English, with a script being developed at the same time; endangerment entered the picture with persecution by colonial and enclaving communities leading to the present moribund state; language death, completing the LLC in only 80 years, appears to be imminent.

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