

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION, COMPUTER SERVICES
AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

SSO SURVEY REPORT

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1 INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Survey

Sso is listed in the Ethnologue as having no Scripture and as a "possible" translation need. The goal of this survey was to evaluate the sociolinguistic situation in order to determine the need for standardization of Sso and to reclassify it as having either a "probable" or "unlikely" translation need. Also, if standardization is deemed necessary, this survey was designed to determine what would be the appropriate standard reference dialect.

The survey was carried out by M. Etienne Sadembouo of MESIRES and S.I.L. members Juerg Stalder, and Dave and Karen Bradley from January 20-23, 1992.

Background

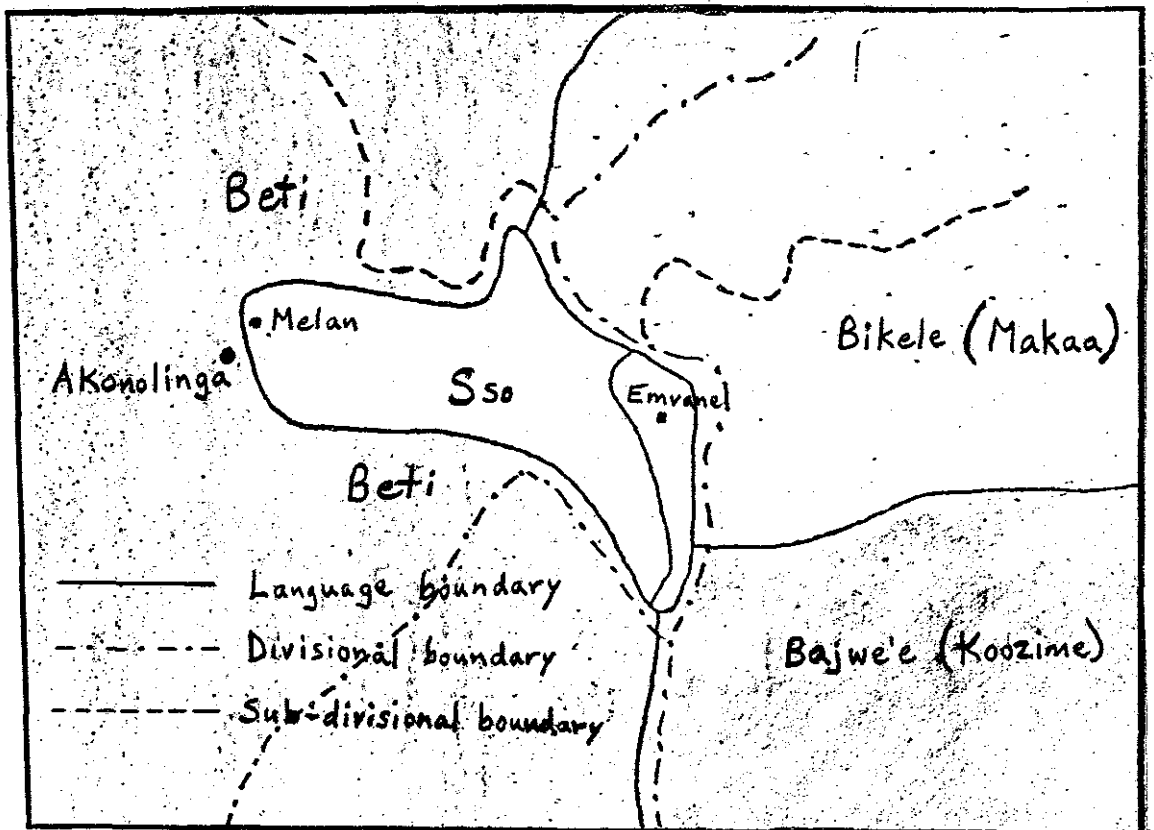
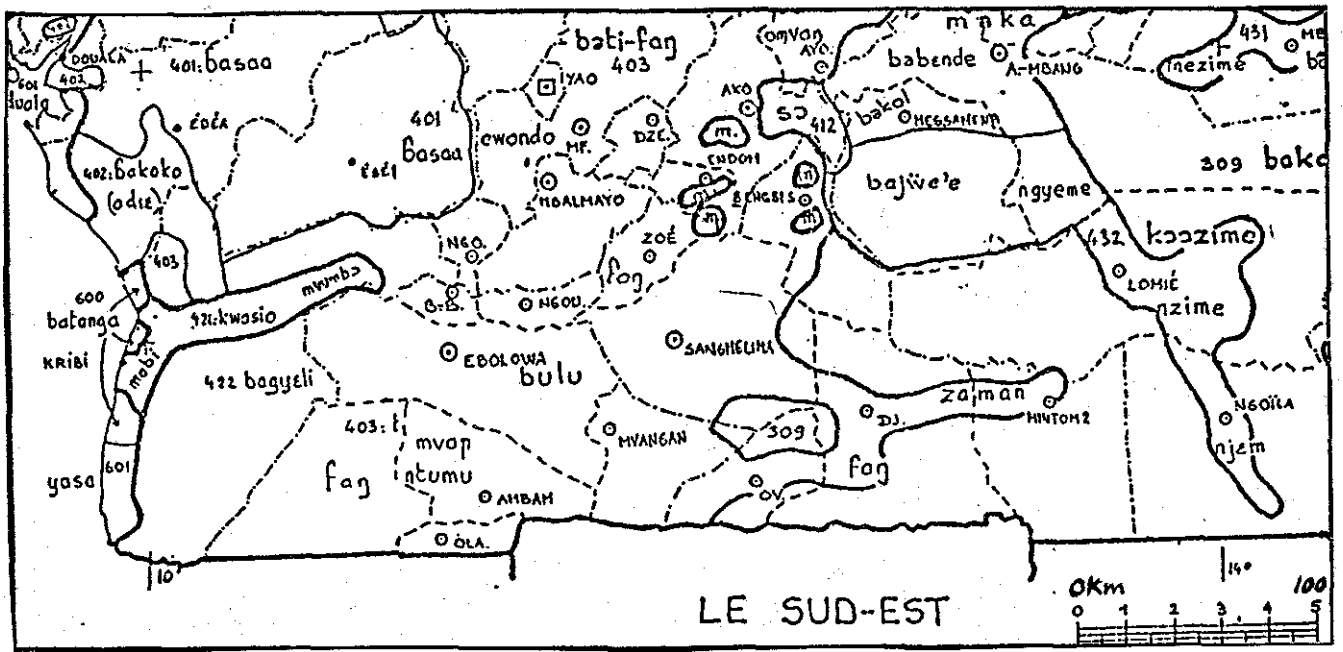
Very little linguistic research has been done on the Sso language. ALCAM lists a six-page article by Adolph von Duisburg published in 1914, entitled "Uberreste der Sso-Sprache". We also know of a word list which is kept in the CREA files and a doctoral dissertation by Daniel-Pierre Engolo having to do with the Sso language. Unfortunately, we have not had access to any of these works.

Sso is classified by Guthrie in the A80 group, and as number 412 in the Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun (ALCAM). It is an Equatorial Bantu language spoken in the Center Province of Cameroon, Nyong-et-Mfoumou division, to the east of Akonolinga. The Sso area comprises two separate cantons, Melan in the west and Emvane in the east. Linguistically, there are certain variations in vocabulary and pronunciation between the two cantons. Sso is surrounded by Beti except to the east, where it borders Mekaa and Koozime, related languages. Throughout this report, Beti will be used to refer to Ewondo and Bulu, two of its major dialects which are adjacent to the Sso area.

According to ALCAM there are 5-10,000 Sso speakers. The Ethnologue estimate is 7,500, based on a 1982 survey. These figures were confirmed in interviews with both church and government officials in the area who indicated the Sso population at about 9,000 speakers.

At some point, several groups of Sso migrated toward the Coast "in search of salt", as expressed by one interviewee. Today these groups speak Mvumbo and Mabi, dialects of Kwasio, but are still considered as relatives by the Sso.

Sso area and surrounding languages
Taken from ALCAM



2 PROCEDURES

This survey was conducted using a recently developed approach known as "rapid appraisal". The procedures were designed to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation of the area in question. The goal is to obtain the appropriate information in as short a time as possible (less than one week), using informal interviews, and individual and group questionnaires.

One questionnaire was administered in a group interview to some of the leaders in each area to determine the geographical extent of the language, with particular reference to the dialect situation. This was used to confirm the impressions gained from library research.

A second questionnaire, focusing on attitudes and language use, was administered to 10 people in the Canton of Melan and to 11 in the Canton of Emvane. This is S.I.L. Cameroon's Questionnaire no. 3, and will be referred to as such throughout the remainder of the report. In order to obtain a representative picture of the language situation, two categories were of interest: age and sex. The questionnaire respondents ranged in age from 22 to 66 and included both men and women.

Throughout the research, three major areas were kept under consideration:

- (a) dialect situation and potential use of a closely related language as a standardized form, as well as the corresponding attitudes
- (b) extent of bilingualism in Beti and/or French, and corresponding attitudes
- (c) viability of the language as shown by patterns of language use and attitudes toward other languages

One very useful feature of the rapid appraisal strategy is that evaluation is done periodically as the survey progresses. At the end of each day of data collection, an evaluation session was held which allowed for preliminary analysis. This was particularly useful in that it allowed the research team to recognize holes in the data collected, and pinpoint questions to focus on in future data collection.

3 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Dialect situation

Library research indicated that there are no distinct dialects. However, there are two different varieties which exhibit vocabulary and pronunciation distinctions, Melan Sso and Emvane Sso.

Inherent Intercomprehension

The information reported here comes from the informal and group interviews, as well as from Questionnaire 3, qus. 2.9 and 2.10.

Melan Sso-Emvane Sso:

As previously stated, minor differences in pronunciation and vocabulary exist between the two cantons. However, in each canton, the people report no difficulty in intercomprehension, even for children as young as 3 or 4 years old. They consider themselves to be one people and have positive attitudes toward each other. The vocabulary differences are mainly due to borrowing by the Melan Sso from neighboring languages, particularly Beti.

Sso-Mvumbo:

There is a general knowledge that the Sso are related to the Mvumbo and Mabi speakers near Kribi, who migrated from the Sso area toward the ocean. When asked about intercomprehension, the Emvane Sso said that in past history they used to understand each other, but at present they no longer do. On the other hand, the Melan Sso said they would be able to understand, even their children as young as ten years old if given "about 3 months" of exposure to Mvumbo. This indicates a certain amount of learning necessary for intercomprehension, and hence an inadequate level of inherent intelligibility. The different responses given by the Melan and Emvane speakers might be explained by the differing influence of Beti.

Sso-Mekaa and Sso-Koozime:

Two related languages are found to the northeast and southeast of the Sso area, Mekaa and Koozime respectively. All of the Melan Sso questioned said that they would use Beti or French in dealing with either the Mekaa or the Koozime. The Emvane Sso reported that they would retain their language when talking with speakers of Bikele, the nearest Mekaa dialect, as well as with speakers of the nearest Koozime dialect, Badjwe'e. These would in turn respond in their own speech form with no problems of intercomprehension. However, with respect to the standardized dialects of both Mekaa and Koozime, the Emvane Sso said that one must be between 10 and 25 years of age, depending on the amount of contact with the Mekaa, before he would be able to understand them. Understanding Koozime was deemed very difficult, if at all possible, even for adults who have had much contact. This is obviously not a question of inherent intelligibility, and the standardized forms of Mekaa or Koozime would not serve the Sso without necessitating a great deal of language learning.

Attitudes

The information given here comes from the group interviews as well as from Questionnaire 3, qus. 3.1-3.4, and 3.6.

The attitude towards the prospect of the standardisation of Sso is very positive on all counts. All 20 responses to the question of learning to read and write Sso were positive, and 18 of 20 expressed the desire to use Sso as the medium of instruction in the early grades of school before switching to French.

Emvane Sso is considered by everyone interviewed to be the "pure Sso". In answer to question 3.6, "Where is your language spoken the best?", every individual response, in both cantons, was "in the east" or "Emvane Sso". The reason for this is that Melan Sso is considered to have been influenced to a much greater extent by the neighboring languages,

notably Beti. Because the population of the Canton of Melan is larger than that of Emvane, the group interviewed at Melan indicated a desire for standardisation of that form. However, there is a feeling by some speakers in the east that Melan Sso would be unacceptable as a standardized form because of the influence of surrounding languages.

Comments

From the point of view of intercomprehension, either Melan Sso or Emvane Sso could serve as a standardised form. However, the attitudes indicate that Emvane Sso would probably be more widely accepted by the entire Sso population.

Bilingualism

The information reported here comes from group interviews and Questionnaire 3. More specifically, question 1.7 asks for a list, in order of competence, of the languages spoken by each respondent. Questions 2.3-2.6, 3.3, and 3.4 reveal their attitudes toward these languages. In terms of possible bilingualism, the languages of interest were Beti, a widespread neighboring language, and French, because they are already standardized.

Acquired Intercomprehension

In response to question 1.7, the majority (14 out of 21) listed Beti before French. Six out of 21 listed French first, and one claimed equal competence in both. Each respondent said s/he spoke Beti but five did not speak French. Similar responses were given in informal interviews.

Attitudes

In general, the respondents have a positive attitude towards both French and Beti. In answering questions 2.3 - 2.6, only 1 of 15 indicated some difficulty in understanding Beti proverbs or jokes and 4 of 15 had trouble understanding these in French. Slightly more, 3 of 15 for Beti and 5 of 15 for French, would have difficulty in expressing themselves completely in these languages.

There were 14 people asked if they would be ready to learn to read and write Beti and only 1 said no. Out of 10 people who were asked the same question about French, all said yes. In order of preference, all but one who would be ready to learn both languages, chose French first. This preference might be explained by the use of French in schools.

Comments

The majority of the Sso feel at ease and confident in their comprehension and expression of both Beti and French, and have a positive attitude towards reading and writing them. The question that remains is whether their comprehension is sufficient for understanding the Scriptures in either Beti or French. This would necessitate extensive bilingualism testing which was not in the scope of this survey.

Language Vitality/Viability

Vitality is used here to refer to the condition of the language at present, while viability refers to the projected health of the language in the future. These are complex issues to evaluate, especially with the limited insights gained from just four days in the area. However, certain questionnaire responses have a bearing on this (2.7, 2.8, 3.1, 3.2, 3.6 & 3.7), along with much of the information gained from informal interviews. In addition, several articles give insights which will be of interest in our reflections.

Patterns of language use

For determining the patterns of language use among the Sso, responses to questions 2.7 and 2.8 indicated which languages are used in the following domains:

School:

French, as one of the official languages of Cameroon, is used in the schools throughout the Sso community.

Official business:

When asked which language would be used at the Sous-Prefecture or another public office, most answered French but also said they sometimes use Beti. The choice would depend primarily on whether or not the official spoke Beti.

Church:

Since the 1950's, Catholic priests in this area were encouraged by their bishop to learn Ewondo, a dialect of Beti. Today, this is the predominant language used in the preaching and Scripture reading in the Catholic churches among the Sso. The protestant churches tend to use Bulu, another dialect of Beti. Only mother tongue pastors and catechists do occasional translating and preaching in Sso. Otherwise, Beti is used unless there are non-Beti speakers, in which case French is used. There are no further signs of a community-wide effort, such as the formation of a language committee or comparable institution, to standardize Sso for use in church.

Market:

Akonolinga is the main market town frequented by many different language groups, including the Sso. When asked which language they use at the market, the majority said Beti. However, they often use French as well. Sso is always forfeited in favor of the other person's language if s/he is not a Sso speaker.

Home:

The large Beti presence around the Sso community has led to a great deal of intermarriage. Most of the men who married Beti women reported that their wives speak Sso, as do their children, unless visiting Beti relatives. However, Beti wives in the Canton of Melan reported speaking Beti with their children and each other. When asked what language children use while playing, the majority answered Sso, but that Beti, and French are commonly mixed in. Most of the adults speak primarily Sso with friends their own age in the village.

Attitudes toward Mother Tongue
(Information from questions 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, & 3.7)

There is considerable evidence of a strong positive attitude toward the M.T. Everyone asked would be interested in reading and writing Sso. All but a small minority (2 out of 20) feel that it would be good to have the local language as the means of instruction in the first years of school. On the other hand, in response to the question, "Do you think your language is being replaced by another?" a large majority (12 of 18) said yes. All seven who responded positively from Melan identified Beti as the intruding language while all five from Emvane who fear that Sso is being replaced cite French. In every case this is viewed negatively.

Comments

Language maintenance and shift:

In a chapter on language maintenance and shift, Ralph Fasold mentions societal bilingualism as perhaps the most basic pre-condition for language shift. Various other factors are cited as well, which may be pertinent in evaluating the Sso situation. These include: "smaller population of speakers of the language being shifted from" (i.e. Sso), "industrialization and other economic changes", "school language", and possibly "higher prestige for the language being shifted to" (i.e. Beti).

As noted above, the Sso people have a positive attitude towards their own language, as well as a strong ethnic identity. The results of our research give no reason to suspect that this will change at any time in the foreseeable future, and would indicate a certain degree of language vitality at the present.

On the other hand, there is also a very positive attitude towards being able to read and write Beti and/or French. From the patterns of actual language use, it seems clear that Beti, especially, is playing an increasing role in the lives of the Sso people, particularly in the Canton of Melan. Bilingualism in Beti is virtually universal (although we did not attempt to measure the degree of proficiency). It is also very widespread in terms of domains of use, particularly in the church, the marketplace, and contacts with the surrounding Beti community (including a high rate of intermarriage). Although parents continue to speak Sso with their children, the children mix in Beti and French when playing with others.

These factors indicate that the viability of the language for the future is certainly questionable. Its domains of use are in fact quite limited and are becoming even more so. While there does not seem to be any danger of the language actually dying out, a certain degree of language shift has already taken place and it remains to be seen exactly how far the shift will go.

4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey indicate that there are two varieties of the Sso language, Melan Sso and Emvane Sso. Slight variations between the varieties present no problems for intercomprehension. They see themselves as one people and have a positive attitude towards their mother tongue. As for other languages related to Sso (i.e. Mvumbo, Mabi, Mekaa, Koozime), there is not adequate inherent intelligibility to use one of these as a standardized form.

Regarding the nonrelated languages, there is generalized bilingualism in Beti, and French is frequently used as well. Both these languages have been positively received, although there is some fear that Beti and French are replacing Sso.

The patterns of language use among the Sso indicate a language shift in progress but it is impossible at this point to predict how far the shift will go. Beti and French are used for official business, at church, and at the main market in Akonolinga, while French is used at school. Sso is basically limited to the home and village. The widespread use of Beti and French questions the viability of Sso for the future.

Both church leaders and the Sso themselves conveyed their acceptance of using Beti in church with no apparent lack of comprehension. Also, the Scriptures are available in both Beti and French. In light of these factors and the questionable viability of Sso, we suggest that the need for standardizing Sso is unlikely and recommend revising the Bible translation status of Sso from a "possible" need to an "unlikely" need. In order to further revise this status, extensive bilingualism testing for proficiency, particularly in Beti, would be necessary.

If the Sso language were to be standardized, then perhaps Emvane Sso should be the form chosen. Of course, this choice would need the participation of the community leaders. However, there was no evidence of a felt need for standardization; although the Sso were interested in learning to read and write their language, there were no outward signs of any attempted activity in this regard.

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