

# An Overview of Etulo: An Idomoid Language

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**Abstract:** Etulo is an Idomoid language spoken in two Nigerian states: Taraba and Benue. This work gives an overview of the core linguistic features of Etulo as spoken in Benue state. At the phonological level, we highlight the Etulo sound system, its tonal features, syllable structure and the most common phonological processes attested. At the morphological level, we focus on its derivational morphology which involves morphological processes such as affixation, reduplication and compounding. We give a list of the identified word classes with emphasis on the noun and verbal system. Also discussed, are grammatical features which are considered areal such as its rich class of ideophones and verb serialization. Our findings show that Etulo shares some core structural features with other Idomoid languages such as Idoma. The data used for this study are obtained from Etulo language consultants who are native speakers. We adopt a descriptive approach in the analysis of the Etulo language data.

**Keywords:** Etulo, Derivational Morphology, Ideophones, Verb Serialization, Idomoid, Phonology

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## 1. Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-lingual community made up of over 350 languages. Some of these languages have been researched on while others have remained relatively underdeveloped. Bleambo [1] calls these languages endangered languages as majority of them do not have standardized orthographies, standard varieties, written literatures and Meta languages. Etulo belongs to the group of endangered languages considering that it has yet no standardized orthography, no standardized written literature, it is not taught in schools, and it has no meta language.

In the Benue state, Etulo exists alongside some other indigenous languages like Tiv, Hausa, Idoma, and Iggede. Of all these languages, Tiv is the dominant one. Thus, in addition to their native language, most Etulo people also speak Tiv, which is taught in schools to all students and equally serves as the main language of commerce. The use of Etulo is therefore largely restricted to the home domain and markets or church in the Etulo land. This has caused an influx of Tiv words into the Etulo lexicon. Besides the Tiv language, Etulo also borrows words from English, and Hausa,

as well as other languages that it is in contact with.

The rest of this work is structured as follows: §1 provides more ethnolinguistic information on Etulo, gives a linguistic classification of Etulo as well as the origin/history of the Etulo people. In §2, we discuss some phonological features of Etulo. §3 explores the morphological processes and §4 the attested lexical categories with emphasis on the noun and verbal system. In §5, we highlight some areal grammatical features and in §6 we make a little note on the Etulo orthography. This is followed by the conclusion in §7.

### 1.1. Ethnolinguistic Information on Etulo

The name Etulo refers to the language, the land and the people. According to history, the Etulo were once wrongly called Turu and Utur respectively by the Tiv and Hausa neighbours. Etulo is spoken in two local government areas in Benue state namely: Katsina ala and Buruku LGAs. It is spoken in Benue alongside other languages like Tiv, Hausa, Idoma, Iggede and English. The work is based on the Etulo variant spoken in Benue state. The Etulo land (Ikpesa Etulo) in Benue stretches from 7°N to 9°N latitudes and 11°E to 13°E longitude Tabe [2]. The estimated number of Etulo

speakers varies from one source to another. According to the 1988 census as recorded in Shain [3], Etulo has about ten thousand speakers. The Joshua project, a ministry of the US centre for world missions [4], records about twenty thousand Etulo language speakers. Etulo is made up of about 14 clans. Nine of these (Agbatala, Oglazi, Agbɔ, Ugiɛ, Agia, Ogbulube, Oɣafu, Okpaɣila and Ingwaɖʒɛ) fall into the Buruku Local Government Area, while the remaining five clans (Otsazi, Otanga, Okadiɲa, ɣewe and aɣitanakwu) belong to Katsina Ala Local Government Area of the Benue state.

### 1.2. The Genetic Classification of Etulo

Etulo is classified as an Idomoid language of the Benue Congo subgroup of the Niger Congo language family

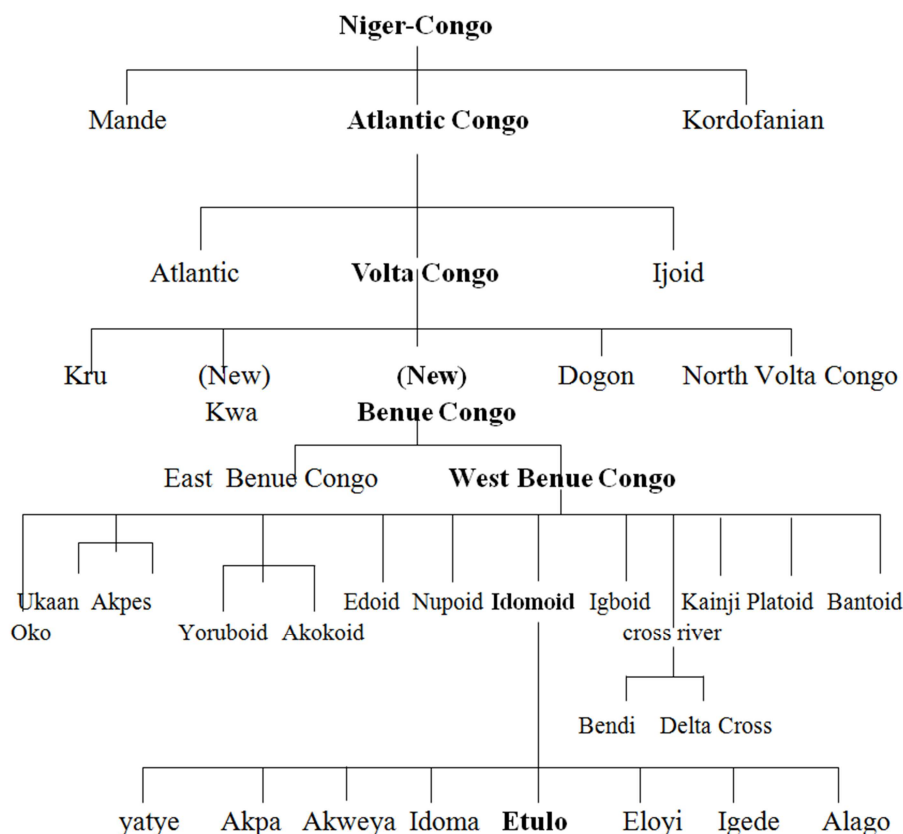


Figure 1. The Etulo language Family Tree.

### 1.3. The Historical Origin of the Etulo People

Tabe [6] traces the history of the Etulo to one of the Jukunoid groups of people that formed the erstwhile Kwararafa kingdom in the distant past. As a result of some socio-political factors, these groups separated and migrated to different areas for settlement. The groups include Etulo, Idoma, Igbirra, Ogoja, Afo, Nupe, Jukun etc. The Etulos occupied the land long before the migration of Tivs to Benue. Gbor [7] recounts that the Etulos had settled on the coast of the Benue River long before the Tiv, who migrated from Swem around the Cameroun hills to meet them there. Gbor claims that it was through conquest that the Tiv people pushed the other segments of the Kwararafa Kingdom, (such as the Jukuns the Idomas and the rest) out of the Benue

valley and settled where they are today. Hanior (8) explains that the Etulo people decided to remain on the coast of the Benue River to maintain their occupation.

Figure 1 shows the language family tree of Etulo as adapted from Williamson [12] and Williamson and Blench [13] with slight modifications.

The Etulos believe to have a progenitor, Ibagye, to whom they can trace back their descent. Ibagye is believed to have had children including Itsikpe who was known as the leader of his people. Itsikpe had three sons namely: Okakwu the eldest, Ozi and Okwe. History has it that these three sons later became the leaders of their people and consequently established a royal family to rule the Etulos Tabe [15].

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## 2. The Phoneme Inventory of Etulo

Etulo has twenty nine distinctive consonant phonemes as

shown in the table below:

Table 1. Etulo Phoneme Inventory.

Place of Art → Manner of Art↓	Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labiovelar	Labialized Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d			k g	kp gb	kw gw	
Nasal	m		n		ɲ	ŋ		nw	
Trill			r						
Fricative		f v	s	ʃ		ɣ			h
Affricate			ts dz	tʃ dʒ					
Lateral			l						
Approximant					j		w		

In previous analysis of Etulo phonology (cf: Armstrong [16], Adams Inyani [17], NBTT [18], the phoneme inventory includes the following phonemes: /ky fy gy bw/. The above phonemes could alternatively be accounted for by the phonological processes of glide formation and labialization. Using our phoneme inventory, words which at the phonological level are realized by previous analysis as /kyɛ/ ‘be old’, /ongya/ ‘woman’ and /fue/ ‘sprinkle’ are rather represented as /kɪɛ/, /óngiâ/, and /fúé/.

Etulo has eight oral vowels as shown in the vowel chart below. These oral vowels have their lengthened and nasalized variants which are non-contrastive.

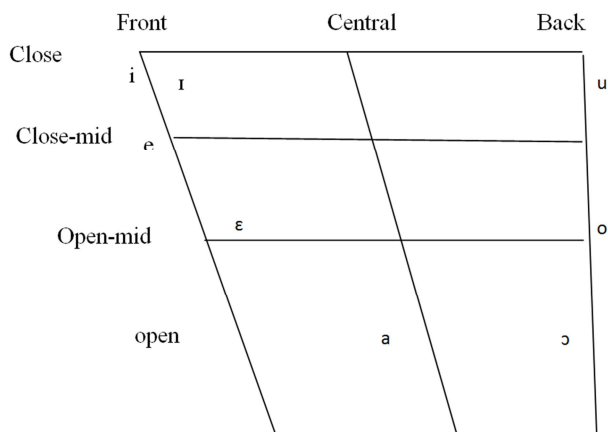


Figure 2. Etulo Vowel Chart.

Etulo presents a partial vowel harmony system based on ATR values. The eight vowels of Etulo fall into two groups: /i e o u/ [+ATR], /ɪ ɛ ɔ/ [-ATR]. The scope of vowel harmony is restricted to a prosodic word. In other words, this feature does not spread leftward to a prefix, pronouns or rightward to a suffix.

Table 2. Illustrations of the syllable structure.

V	CV	N	CCV	CVN
[a] ‘They’	[sá] ‘wash’	[m.tsà] ‘mango’	[plɛ́] ‘early’	[è.giõn] ‘six’
[o] ‘He/She’	[lɔ] ‘write’	[n.dé] ‘be tired’	[á.glá.bá] ‘cutlass’	[a.giõn] ‘name of person’

The CVN and CCV structure are relatively rare. The CCV is particularly common with ideophonic words. The only type of consonant cluster attested is that of a stop and liquid/trill (/pl/, /tr/, /gl/ /fl/). NC sequences such as /mgb ms mts nd ndz/ are analysed as heterosyllabic consonant clusters rather than prenasalized consonants. In (5a), the N /m/

## 2.1. The Tone System

Etulo is a register tone language with three contrastive level tones (high, mid and low) and two gliding tones (rising and falling tones). The rising tone occurs rarely and is non-contrastive. In Etulo, tone performs both lexical and grammatical functions. At the lexical level, it distinguishes between two or more otherwise identical words (1-3). At the grammatical level, the low tone is relevant in the derivation of interrogative constructions (polar questions) as illustrated in (4a-4b).

- 1) wá ‘drink’      2) fiá ‘peel’      3) ábù ‘you’  
wā ‘sweep’      fiā ‘sweep’      àbù ‘shirt’  
wà ‘perfect marker’      fià ‘try’

- 4a) àdì gié míbúé      4b) àdì gié míbúéé  
PN eat meat      PN eat meat-Q  
‘Adi ate meat’      ‘Did Adi eat meat?’

## 2.2. The Syllable Structure

Etulo mainly presents open syllables except for a few words that end with the alveolar nasal /n/. A sketch of the syllable structure is given below:

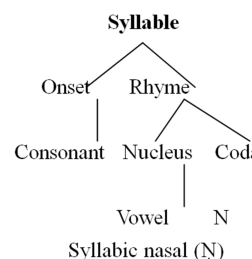


Figure 3. Etulo Syllable Structure.

Five syllable types are attested:

belongs to the first syllable and is realized as a coda while the C /gb/ belongs to the second syllable. In (5b) the m belongs to the first syllable and is realized as a nucleus while the C /ts/ belongs to another syllable. Such NC clusters are therefore not prenasalized consonants.

- 5a) [ám.gbéká] ‘some’

5b) [m̩.t̩sà] ‘mango

### 2.3. Phonological Processes

Some of the phonological processes attested in Etulo are elision, assimilation (vowel and consonant assimilation where the latter is associated with homorganic nasals), vowel coalescence, glide formation and vowel insertion. We briefly discuss two of these processes in this section.

#### 2.3.1. Vowel Insertion

Vowel insertion involves altering the phonological pattern of foreign/borrowed words (nouns) by the insertion of a low tone vowel. The process of vowel insertion may be prothetic or epenthetic. It is prothetic when the insertion occurs at the word initial position and epenthetic when it occurs in the word final position. Nouns in Etulo mostly begin with a vowel or syllabic nasal but hardly with a consonant. Words (especially nouns) borrowed from other languages like English and Hausa are modified to adapt to the phonological pattern of indigenous Etulo nouns by the insertion of a low tone vowel at the beginning or end of a word. In some cases however, the modification of these borrowed words is not restricted to the process of vowel insertion. This is illustrated with the following examples:

Table 3. Illustration of vowel insertion.

Hausa	Etulo	English	Etulo
makaranta ‘school’	umakaranta ‘school’	bucket	ibokoti
shinkafa ‘rice’	Itsikapa ‘rice’	tomato	itumatu
		Luke	iluka

Table 4. Illustrations of affixation.

Gerundive nominals	Infinitive verb form	Nominalized ideophone
lɔ ‘write’ → ò – lɔlɔ ‘writing’	ò – lɔ ‘to write’	ánwúntò ò-fèlèfèlè ‘silky cloth’
wá ‘drink’ → ò – wáwá ‘drinking’	ò-wá ‘to drink’	èni ò-tétété ‘dripping water’
nwɔ ‘kill’ → ò – nwɔnwɔ ‘killing’	ò-nwɔ ‘to kill’	èwò ò – trɔtrɔ ‘smooth body’

### 3.2. Reduplication

Reduplication is relevant in the formation of derived gerundive nominals, ideophones (see table 4) and the derivation of a small set of adjectives from nouns. For the derivation of adjectives from nouns, the word initial vowel of the nouns /u/ is substituted by the high tone vowel /o/. From a diachronic viewpoint the high tone vowel may have been a derivational prefix but is now unproductive. Examples:

Base (noun) Reduplicated form (adjective)

9a) úmbí ‘dirt’ → ómbímbí ‘black/dark’

b) úndzÉ ‘whiteness’ → óndzúndzÉ ‘white’

c) úmá ‘fairness’ → ómúmá ‘red’

### 3.3. Compounding

Two types of compounds are identified: nominal and verbal. Both compound types are characterized by phonological features such as vowel assimilation, elision and tonal change.

#### 2.3.2. Vowel Elision

Vowel elision in Etulo involves the deletion of the first or second of two adjacent vowels at word boundary. This process is applicable to V+N (6) and N+N (7-8) constructions.

6) /ná/ # /únâ/ → [núná] ‘sleep’

sleep sleep

7) /ɛkwɔ/ # /àdɛ/ → [ɛkwádɛ] ‘palm tree’

tree palm

8) /ónɔ/ # /èkìò/ → [ònékìò] ‘sea’

mother river

## 3. Morphological Features

Etulo is predominantly an isolating language with little agglutinative features. Grammatical categories such as tense, aspect and number are mostly marked by isolated morphemes rather than by affixes. In a derivational function, the only categories known to take an affix are the verb and ideophone. The three word formation processes identified are: affixation, reduplication and compounding.

### 3.1. Affixation

Etulo has a nominalizing low tone vowel prefix *o-* which attaches to verbs in the formation of derived nominals and to ideophones in modifying function. In addition to prefixation, the derivation of gerundive nominals involves the process of reduplication and tonal modification.

#### 3.3.1. Nominal Compounds

Three types of nominal compounds are attested: the genitive (10a), amalgamated (10b) and synthetic compounds (10c). Examples:

10a) ònwɛ èjèjì → ònwè – èjèjì

child blood → ‘infant’

10b) \*ikp + òndû → ìkpóndû

mouth ‘lips’

12c) ɛkwɔ o – nwɔnwɔ → ɛkwɔ ònwɔnwɔ

tree drying ‘firewood’

#### 3.3.2. Verb Compound

Three groups of verb compounds are identified. The first group comprises at least two verbs which can occur independently. Some of the verb compounds in this group are lexicalised serial verbs (11a-b). The second group comprises the verb and a particle or two verbs. They are usually endocentric compounds with a compositional meaning (12a-b). The third group comprises inseparable forms which are

most likely derived from V+N constructions. The verb component is hardly recoverable as a result of vowel elision or contraction (13). Examples:

- 11a) mùà + dzɛ → mùàdzɛ  
reduce cut 'cut into pieces'
- 11b) gbó + nwɔ → gbónwɔ  
beat kill 'kill by beating/beat to death'
- 12a) dzɛ + ntó → dzùntó 'stand up'
- 12b) sɔ + ké → sɔkɛ 'seat on'
- 13) \*ti + úmbí → tímíbí 'be bad'

## 4. The Word Classes

The word classes identified in Etulo include the noun, verb, adjective (a small class), adverb, pronoun and preposition. In this section, we briefly highlight some features of two lexical categories: the noun and verb.

### 4.1. The Noun

As noted earlier, Etulo nouns begin with a vowel or syllabic nasal but hardly with a consonant. The noun comprises at least two syllables. It may be disyllabic, trisyllabic, or polysyllabic.

Table 5. Etulo Noun Structure.

Disyllabic	Trisyllabic	Polysyllabic
àngá 'drum'	ùnwógíè 'food'	òkpákpágìdì 'butterfly'
àdzɛ 'poverty'	mímáfá 'youth'	ikínàbɔ 'tortoise'

Across languages, number is a grammatical category associated with the noun. In Etulo, number is expressed via different means; vowel substitution (14a-b), numerals/modifiers, plural morpheme *èmi* (15a-b) and dissimilar forms (16). Number marking may be optional or obligatory depending on the noun. Most animate (-human) and inanimate nouns may but need not be marked for number while animate / +human (kinship terms) nouns are obligatorily marked for number. The following examples are illustrative:

- 14a) ónglà 'woman' → énglà 'women'
- 14b) óbâ 'husband' → ébâ 'husbands'
- 15a) àfè 'book' → èmí àfè 'books'
- 15b) ifà 'snake' → èmí ifà 'snakes'
- 16) ònwé 'child' → èmgbé 'children'

### 4.2. The Verb

Many Idomoid languages have the common Eastern Kwa trait that allows verbs to begin with a consonant and nouns to begin with a vowel Armstrong [18]. This observation holds in Etulo. The verb root typically begins with a consonant or syllabic nasal and is open ended. Verb roots in Etulo consist of not more than three syllables. The monosyllabic verb root seems more common than the disyllabic and trisyllabic verb roots.

Etulo verbs may be classified on the basis of their transitivity value, semantics, tone, and their ability to take meaning specifiers. In this section, we focus on the

classification made on the basis of the last criterion (ability to take meaning specifiers/complements). This is however, not a peculiar feature of Etulo. Some other West African languages such as Igbo, Ewe, Akan, Idoma and Ga also classify verbs into groups based on their capacity to take complements. Etulo makes a broad distinction between two classes of verbs: complement and non-complement verbs.

#### 4.2.1. Complement Verbs

A complement verb co-exists at the underlying structure with a nominal for the full specification of its meaning. Such verbs are either ambiguous or subject to different semantic interpretations without their complement which is usually a noun. The verb root and nominal complement are so bound together in meaning that native speakers intuitively think of some of them (verb + complement) as one word. Another motivation for such analysis by native speaker is traced to the phonological process of vowel elision and contraction which is quite common with some complement verbs in spoken speech (17a-b).

- 17a) tsɛ òɲà 'run' → tsɛɲà 'run'  
'run race'

- 17b) ɲ ò èwô 'bath' → ɲwô 'bath'  
'bath body'

In (18), we give a list of other complement verbs including those that are cognate with their complement. They are written in full. Their phonologically modified variants are not given here.

- 18a) ɲi aɲi 'sing' 18b) wa ɛlɛla 'dream' 18c) gboabɔɔ 'clap hand'

- ɲi ifue 'dance' wa iwu 'smoke' gbo  
anga 'beat drum'  
ɲi okwɔ 'farm' wa eni 'drink' gbo ibe  
'fight'

#### 4.2.2. Non Complement Verbs

Non-complement verbs do not require an obligatory noun as complement for the full realisation of meaning. Many disyllabic verbs fall within this group. Examples:

- 19a) dí 'see'
- b) bùlù 'fly'
- c) mgbò 'be full'
- d) òdɛɛ 'be tired'
- e) miná 'want'

## 5. Areal Features

We this section, we highlight two areal features in Etulo namely; verb serialization and the existence of a rich class of ideophones.

### 5.1. Verb Serialization

Verb serialization is considered an areal feature of many West African languages, especially of Kwa, Benue Congo

and Gur subgroups. The most typical notions expressed by serial verbs in these languages include: accompaniment, direction, benefactivity, instrumental and adverbial meaning.

In Etulo, verb serialization basically refers to verb series in a monoclausal that denote unified or complex events which are otherwise expressed by single verbs in many other languages. The most typical characterizations of SVCs across languages hold in Etulo (monoclausality, absence of a syntactic dependency marker, shared argument, shared

negation, shared tense-aspect values etc.). The most frequently occurring verbs in SVCs include *kie* 'take', *nu* 'give', and directional motion verbs such as *ke*, *luu* 'go', *wa*, *ba* 'come'. Some of the meanings expressed by serial verbs include benefactivity (20), instrumental meaning (21) accompaniment (22), comparison (23), direction (24) and adverbial meaning (25). The following examples are illustrative:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 20) adi gia afe oŋi nu ani<br>PN buy book one give me<br>'Adi bought me a book'                     | 21) ani kie ifa le wo ma imio<br>1SG: SUBJ take snake PROG put them fear<br>'I am frightening them with a snake'     |
| 22) ani kie afe ke umakaranta<br>1SG: SUBJ take book go school<br>'I went to school with a book'    | 23) eba mgbi isese gigie ŋa mgbi ani<br>knife of PN be sharp surpass POSS me<br>'Isese's knife is sharper than mine' |
| 24) adi le do eso ba mbi eji<br>PN PROG send message come to us<br>'Adi is sending a message to us' | 25) inwunɔ bulu lu wa<br>bird fly go PERF<br>'The bird has flown away'   |

## 5.2. Ideophones

A description of ideophones has been given in many West African languages such as Yoruba by Courtenay [19], Ewe by Ameka [20], Igbo by Maduka [21], Wolaitta by Azeb [22], Emai by Egbokhare [23] etc. Some of the most common features of ideophones include vowel lengthening, reduplication (partial or full), rigid tonal structure, deviant phonotactics, little or no morphology etc.

Etulo ideophones are a group of words that vividly describe or depict the nature of an activity or state which can perform a range of syntactic functions. Common features of Etulo ideophones include vowel lengthening, a uniform tone pattern (with few exceptions) and reduplication. Except for the common occurrence of the relatively rare CCV syllable structure, no peculiarity is observed with the ideophones as regards their syllable structure.

- |                                     |                                  |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 26a) trɛtrɛ 'bald (smooth surface)  | 27b) wúũ 'sound of a moving car' |
| b) ndrɛndrɛ 'silky'                 | b) tũũ 'horrible smell'          |
| c) flɔflɔ 'sound of shuffling feet' | c) biũũ 'extremely dark'         |

Etulo ideophones do not constitute a distinct grammatical category. They cut across different word classes. The ideophones function as verb modifiers (adverbs), nominal modifiers (adjectives) and nominals in argument positions. In predicative function, ideophones are preceded by the low tone copula *lɛ*, linking the NP subject and the ideophone which modifies it (29b). Consider the following examples:

### Adverbial function:

- 28) adi lɛ kɪfɛ flɔflɔ  
PN PROG walk IDEO (sound of shuffling feet)  
'Adi is walking noisily'

### Adjectival function:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 29a) ánî dí ànwúntò ò-fɛlɛfɛlɛ<br>1SG: SUBJ see cloth PREF-IDEO.(silky)<br>'I saw a silky cloth' | 29b) ànwúntò nê lɛ fɛlɛfɛlɛ<br>cloth this is IDEO.(silky)<br>'This cloth is silky' |
|--|--|

### Nominal function:

- 30) ò-plàplàpià mgbí èniàdé tíf í  
PREF-IDEO of palmwine be good  
'The sweetness of palmwine is good'

## 6. On the Etulo Orthography

For the sake of clarity, we have adopted the use of phonetic alphabets in the presentation of our data to avoid the confusion associated with the use of a non-standardized orthography. In the scanty literature existing on the Etulo

grammar, one observes a lot of inconsistencies in the orthography used by individual scholars. Take for instance the Etulo word for goat which is written in three different ways depending on the choice of the writer: *mndo*, *undo* and *ndo*. To avoid such confusion, there is an urgent need for a uniform graphic representation of the Etulo language. Seeing that Etulo requires a standardized orthography, its language

scholars/ linguists (especially native speakers) are faced with the task of drafting and proposing a generally accepted orthography. This task could be done following the principles of a good orthography such as accuracy, consistency, convenience, familiarity and economy as articulated in Williamson [24] and other similar literature. Since Etulo native speakers in Benue state are also mostly proficient in Tiv language, there is always the tendency to adopt in the Etulo orthography that which is prevalent in the Tiv orthography. This happens to be a common practice in the different versions of the graphic representations of Etulo currently in use. We propose that language scholars of Etulo origin should try as much as they can to adhere to the principles of a good orthography in articulating the Etulo orthography and resist the urge to draft into Etulo all the practices and rules that are prevalent in Tiv since both are different and full-fledged languages in their own right.

## 7. Conclusion

In this work, we have briefly touched on different aspects of the Etulo grammar, pointing out some of its phonological, morphological, syntactic and areal features. Etulo is an isolating language with a predominant SVO word order. It shares some similarities with many other Benue Congo languages. A lot work still needs to be done on Etulo if it must be saved from extinction in the near future.

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