



# An Overview of Itu Mbon Uso Consonants

**Idongesit Edo\***

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages University of Calabar, Nigeria

Email: [edoidongesit2012@yahoo.com](mailto:edoidongesit2012@yahoo.com)

**Okokon Akpan**

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study attempts a systematic description and classification of Itu Mbon Uso Consonants, using a descriptive framework. This research will provide a background study for the description of Itu Mbon Uso consonants. It aims to establish and provide a detailed study of the consonant sounds available in the Itu Mbon Uso language. Data was collected through primary and secondary sources. The trial version of the Ibadan 400 wordlist was used in data collection. In addition, there was the need to develop short sentences in the language so as to capture the pronunciation of words not found in the 400 wordlist and to show the position of each segment in words. The objective of this research is the need to develop our indigenous languages and save them from extinction, which should begin with the development of the orthography. The study revealed that they are seventeen phonemic and twenty phonetic consonants in Itu Mbon Uso with syllabic features such as aspiration and consonant processes like nasalization and palatalization. Our contribution is the provision of the consonantal inventory of the language which will act as a springboard for the eventual development of orthography for the language. The study is also important documentation of an endangered language, which had hitherto received little attention. It is recommended that research be carried out on the vowel system of the language to ensure an eventual orthography for the language.

**Keywords:** Phonology; Phonetics; Consonants; Consonant processes; Phonemic and phonetic consonants; Orthography; Language documentation.

## 1. Introduction

Itu Mbon Uso is one of the vast number of languages in the Lower Cross language group, including Ibibio, Efik, Anaang, Ito, Oro, Okobo, Obolo, Ibeno and Ekid. Essien (1990), has this to say:

...among the four million speakers of the Ibibio language are small groups speaking small languages like Itu Mbon Uso, Iwere, Nkari and Ukwu. Speakers of these small languages claim ethnically, they are Ibibio and that they are mutually intelligible to one another, though the other Ibibio speakers hardly understand them.

One of these 'small' languages which Essien (1990), is talking about is Itu Mbon Uso, spoken in Ini Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Itu Mbon Uso is spoken in Oku, Ikot Nta, Ananamong, Obot Ndon, Ebo, Ikot Essien, Nchana Ebua, Mkpu, Ikporom, Okop Edi, Mbuyat villages in Itu Mbon Uso Clan of Ini Local Government Area. Itu Mbon Uso is a clan, just like the other three clans – Nkari, Ikpe and Odoro Ikono clans that make up Ini Local Government Area.

Itu Mbon Uso is also a boundary suburb, between Akwa Ibom State and Abia State. It shares the same boundary in the north by Idime in Abia State and in the south by Ikpe Ikot Nkon and Ikono Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

The 1991 Census puts the population of Itu Mbon Uso at 30,000, but the speakers (native) claim the census figure was grossly under-reported. They claim that a clan of (eleven) 11 large villages, with each village subdivided into 3 smaller villages, cannot be less than 150,000 people. Presently, they have filed papers at the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, demanding a separate local government, to prove that they are more than the 30,000 the 1991 census ascribed to them. The people are mainly farmers, traders, fishermen and civil servants.

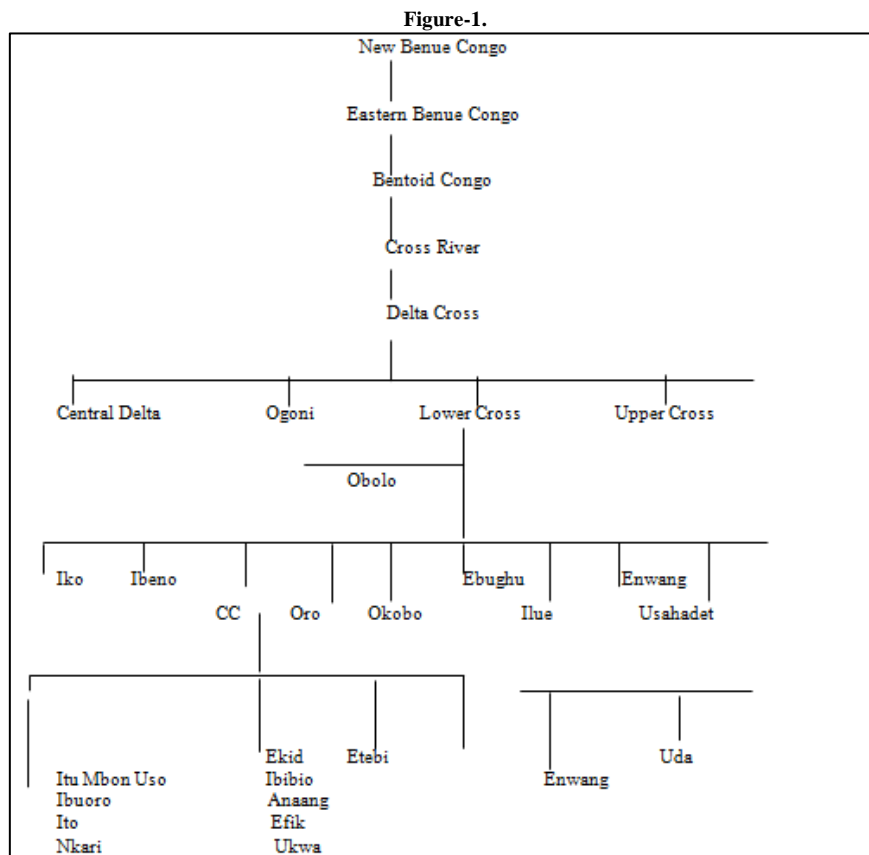
The clan has 11 primary schools, one in each of the 11 large villages and three secondary schools. The clan head of Itu Mbon Uso is His Royal Highness (HRH) Ntoeng Effiong Akpan, presently the Paramount Ruler of Ini Local Government Area.

The three other language varieties apart from Ibibio, spoken in Ini Local Government are Ito, Iwere and Nkari. According to Akpan (2007), an indigene of Nchana Ebua in Itu Mbon Uso, there is mutual intelligibility between the various language varieties of Ini Local Government. A native speaker of Itu Mbon Uso will readily understand Ito or Iwere or Nkari dialect and vice versa. They also speak and understand Ibibio, but Ibibio speakers do not understand them. This is a situation technically known as unidirectional intelligibility. Our major task here is to establish the number of phonemic consonants available in Itu Mbon Uso and how they are distributed in the language.

\*Corresponding Author

### 1.1. Background of the Study

This study focuses on the Itu Mbon Uso language which according to Essien (1990) is among the small ‘languages’ classified under the ‘Ibibiod’ family of languages. Other languages under the ‘Ibibiod’ family are Ito, Iwere, and Ukwa among others. Together, they constitute about one million speakers (Essien, 1990). The diagram below shows the linguistic classification of Itu Mbon Uso.



(Connel, 1991)

This diagram shows that Itu Mbon Uso is a Central Lower Cross language, and it is closer to Nkari, Ito and Ibuoro than it is to Ibibio.

As stated earlier, mutual intelligibility among speakers of these ‘languages’ are sometimes unidirectional. Noah (1980) attributes the dialectal differences between the various Ibibio group of languages to the search for more land for cultivation. These languages vary as a result of different personal and group contacts and the different social situations the migrating people found themselves.

Given that only Ibibio and Anaang have so far been ‘developed’ among the ‘Ibibiod’ group of languages, it has become necessary for other languages in the ‘Ibibiod’ group of languages to be developed too. A close look at the languages of the ‘Ibibiod’ group shows minor differences in their phonology. This study will therefore analyze the consonants found in Itu Mbon Uso and their distribution in the language. Feedback report from this research will serve as a spring board for future researchers. The policy of on mother-tongue education, at least, at the primary school level also triggered off this research as a starting point towards the development of orthography for Itu Mbon Uso in future. Teachers of the language can, at least for now, begin to teach the learners of the significant phonemic consonants of Itu Mbon Uso, as beginning point. This study will also motivate other enlightened native speakers of the language, and linguists generally, to have interest in working on the language.

This study will focus on the distribution, patterns and phonological processes affecting Itu Mbon Uso consonants. The study will also be of pedagogical significance, especially to teachers of Nigerian Languages in post primary and higher institutions. Moreover, this study will be of major importance to Itu Mbon Uso speakers since it is going to provide them with the consonant inventory of the language and how these sounds are organized in the language.

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1988), most scholars agree that a deep knowledge of one’s mother tongue facilitates second language learning. Therefore, to the native speakers of Itu Mbon Uso, this study will aid them immensely in their quest to acquire a second language, which in this case is Ibibio or the English language. There are also many Itu Mbon Uso people who are strangers to their language. This work will help them to familiarize themselves with an aspect of their mother tongue.

Finally, this study will serve as a motivation to other researchers to delve into other aspects of this language or explore more on the consonants of this language towards the development of orthography for Itu Mbon Uso. This study will also be useful in helping to provide primers for teachers and learners of the language.

## 2. Research Methodology

Data for this study was collected from two sources. The first was the Ibadan 400 word list which contains four hundred vocabulary items from animals to plants, in the local environment, numbers, kinship terms, body parts, verbs, adjectives, natural phenomena and daily activities.

The second source was from native speakers. Therefore, a field trip to Itu Mbon Uso was necessary and was undertaken.

This researcher visited the area twice, in the company of indigenes of the area. We were able to get the actual pronunciation of all the words in the Ibadan 400 word list from five men and three women in the clan.

Moreover, a list of 50 short sentences and greetings in English was given for translation into Itu Mbon Uso. This was to help in showing the position of words and segments in an utterance.

## 3. Phonetics and Phonology

Robins (1990), has observed that “the only universal medium of linguistic communication among all normal human beings (i.e. excluding the deaf and dumb, some congenital idiots, etc) is speech, and the scientific study of this speech is known as phonetics”. Phonetics is therefore the foundation of linguistic studies.

Ladefoged (1982), notes that “phonetics is concerned with describing the speech sounds that occur in the languages of the world” He went ahead to outline what is involved in the study of these sounds, their patterns and how they change in different circumstances.

Another important feature of phonetics is that it “explains why certain sounds occur more frequently than others. Hyman (1975) supports this view with an example from French. The vowel [ú] as in [rú] ‘rue’ ‘street’ has a very restricted distribution in the sound system of the world’s languages while [a] is said to be the most common in all languages of the world and is therefore universal. The implication for this is that there may be some consonants in Itu Mbon Uso which may not be found in other languages in the Lower Cross language group, and vice versa.

From the foregoing, we can see that phonetics studies how speech sounds are made, transmitted and received. It is a study that requires as its source of data, a human being with an intact auditory mechanism and a functioning set of vocal organs. The person’s particular language background is not strictly relevant. Phoneticians would draw the same conclusions about the production and reception of speech whether they were dealing with speakers of English, Ibibio or Itu Mbon Uso. Phonetics is universal while phonology is language specific. Phonetics provides the raw data for phonology to work upon Fromkin and Rodman (1988).

On the contrary, the primary aim of phonology, according to Crystal (1990) is to discover the principles that govern the way sounds are organized in languages, and to explain the variations that occur.

A common methodology is to begin with an individual language, to determine which sound units are used and how these sounds pattern in the language’s phonological structure. The properties of different sound systems are then compared, and hypotheses developed about the rules underlying the use of sounds in that particular language (Crystal, 1990).

When one learns a language, one learns the speech sounds that occur in the language and how they are patterned according to regular rules. Phonology is concerned with this kind of linguistic knowledge. The phonology of a language then, is the system and pattern of speech sounds. Fromkin and Rodman (1988), have observed that:

phonology is used in two ways: as the study of sound patterns in languages and as the sound pattern of a given language. Phonological knowledge permits a speaker to produce sounds that form meaningful utterances, to recognize a foreign accent, to make up new words, to add the appropriate phonetic segments to form plurals and past tenses, to produce aspirated and unaspirated voiceless stops in the appropriate context, to recognize what is or is not a sound in the language, and the knowledge that different phonetic strings may represent the same ‘meaningful unit’.

Phonology has, in fact, been called ‘functional phonetics’ (Robins, 1990). It views language as a communication system in its theory and procedures of analysis. Kenstowicz and Kisserberth (1979), define phonology as “the study of the system underlying the selection and use of sounds in the languages of the world”. As the study of the sound system of a particular language, phonology through a system of contrast investigates the meaning difference between sounds. Consider /t/ and /d/ in Itu Mbon Uso for example. In words like /tát/ ‘loosen’ and /dát/ ‘take’, /t/ and /d/ are distinct sounds used to make the meaning difference in the words above.

## 4. Lower Cross Consonants

The Lower Cross language group takes its name from its geographical location, being situated in the lower part of the Cross River basin (Connel, 1991). The linguistic situation in the Lower Cross is complex because of the large number of languages found in the relatively small and densely populated area. Connel (1991), posits nineteen Lower Cross languages and Urua (2000) quoting Essien (1995) also posits nineteen.

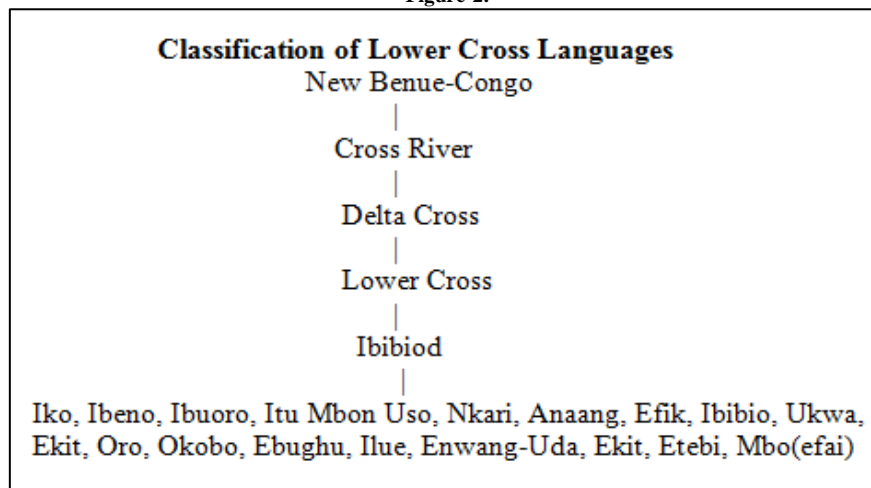
However, the most comprehensive work on the Lower Cross languages is done by Connel (1991). He observes that:

a detailed analysis have not been done to determine precisely the phonemic inventories of all Lower Cross languages. However, the same or similar characteristics are to be found in all languages of the group, making it possible to give a generalized account of certain aspects of the Lower Cross consonant phonology.

He goes further to observe that throughout the Lower Cross language group, all consonant phonemes in a given language may occur in initial position (word initial position), exceptions being the contrast between /kp/ and /p/ in

some dialects of Ibibio in medial position (Essien, 1995), where it does not occur initially; and a contrast between /k/ and /l/ in Ekit where /l/ does not occur initially. Below is a genetic tree showing relationships of Lower Cross languages.

Figure-2.



(Urua, 2000)

Essien (1990), has observed that Ibibio has fifteen phonemic consonants, ten of which are stops, six oral and four nasal, two fricatives and three approximants. Of the oral stops, one of them /kp/ is an implosive. He also observed that of the oral stops, the velar stop and labio-velar implosive have no voiced counterparts and this result in a half-symmetric system.

Urua (2000), has observed that Ibibio has twenty-one phonetic consonants and 13 phonemic ones. The differences in the number of phonemic consonants as presented by different researchers arose because of what Urua (2000) observes as “partly a result of massive overlapping found in the language depending on the position the consonant occupies in a syllable/word and less as a result of dialectal variation.”

A cursory look at the consonants of some of the Lower Cross languages reveal that most of them have between thirteen to sixteen phonemic consonants, thus giving an average of 14 phonemic consonants among them. This is not surprising, as Urua (2000) claims that the nineteen lower cross language varieties or speech forms can be traced to a common source, which following Essien (1990) is known as Ibibiod, and that there is a genetic relationship within the group. The minimal inventory in the Lower Cross language group, according to Connell (1991) is Efik, having 13 consonants while the largest is Obolo with 21 consonants. We do not therefore, expect the consonants of Itu Mbon Uso to be far different from the other language varieties in the Lower Cross language group.

Figure-3. below we present a tabulation of nine Lower Cross languages by Connell (1991)

Anaang	/m n ŋ p b d r l g k kp s f j dz j w/
Ebughu	/m n ŋ p b d gb g t k p kp f s dz j w/
Efik	/m n ŋ p b d t k kp f s j w/
Enwang	/m n ŋ p b d p t k f s v (dz) l j w/
Ibibio	/m n ŋ p b d t k kp f s j w/
Ibeno	/m n ŋ p b d t k kp k w f s t f (l) l j w/
Okobo	/m n ŋ p b d t k f s t f l j w/
Itu Mbon Uso	/m n ŋ p b d t k (p) k kp f s t f j w/
Oron	/m n ŋ p b d t k kp f s l j w/

(Connell, 1991)

This tabulation has revealed some interesting aspects of the Lower Cross consonants. The most dominant consonants in the group are /m n ŋ p f t s k/ while the rarest is the alveolar trill /r/.

Whereas Connell (1991) posits 15 phonemic consonants for Itu Mbon Uso, in this work, we are proposing 17 phonemic consonants. The difference is in the alveolar trill /r/, which is attested in the language. Connell observes that only the alveolar tap [ɾ] exist in Itu Mbon Uso, in place of the alveolar trill. It should be noted that the alveolar tap [ɾ] is a phonetic realization of the underlying /d/ in a weakened position, as in [‘i’fe’fi’ inàà] ‘lips’ and in [‘okpokofɔ’] ‘table’. The alveolar trill is attested in words like [‘eri’] ‘thread’ and [‘ituri’] ‘night’. To pronounce a word like ‘eri’ with an alveolar tap will definitely lead to anglicization of the word.

Secondly, Connell does not include the uvular approximant /ɤ/ in his consonant inventory for Itu Mbon Uso. This phoneme is attested in the language in words like [kùɤ’ɔ’] ‘open’ and [e’ti’ɤi’] ‘okro’.

## 5. Itu Mbon Uso Consonant System

The description and classification of speech sounds is the main aim of phonetic science or phonetics. Sounds may be identified with reference to their production or articulation in the vocal tract, their acoustic transmission or their auditory perception. The most widely used descriptions are articulators, because the vocal tract provides a convenient and well-understood reference point. An articulatory phonetic description according to Crystal (1990), generally makes reference to six main factors:

- (i) **Air Stream:** The source and direction of air flow identifies the basic class of sound. The vast majority of speech sounds are produced using pulmonic egressive air.
- (ii) **Vocal Folds:** The variable action of the vocal folds must be considered in particular, including the presence or absence of vibration. Voiced sounds are produced when the vocal folds vibrate; voiceless sounds are produced when there is no vibration, the folds remaining open.
- (iii) **Soft Palate:** The position of the soft palate must be noted too. When it is lowered, air passes through the nose and the sound is described as nasal or nasalised. When it is raised, air passes through the mouth, and the sound is oral.
- (iv) **Place of Articulation:** This parameter can be used to make several precise phonetic distinctions. It refers to the point in the vocal tract at which the main closure or narrowing is made, such as at the lips, teeth, or hard palate.
- (v) **Manner of Articulation:** This refers to the type of constriction or movement that takes place at any place of articulation, such as a marked degree of narrowing, a closure with sudden release or a closure with slow release.
- (vi) **Lips:** The position of the lips is an important feature of the description of certain sounds, such as whether they are rounded or spread, closed or open.

The above parameters play important part in speech production. However, the major point of difference between vowels and consonants is how they are articulated in the vocal tract and the associated patterns of acoustic energy. In this case, consonants are defined as sounds made by a closure in the vocal tract, or by a narrowing which is so marked that air cannot escape without producing audible friction. With this in mind, we will establish the existence of phonemic consonants in Itu Mbon Uso using the following parameters.

### 5.1. Minimal Pairs

The first feature in determining the phonemes of any language is to see whether substituting one sound for another result in a different word. If it does, the two sounds represent different phonemes. When two different words are identical in every way except for one sound segment that occurs in the same position in the string, the two words are called minimal pairs. Therefore, in Itu Mbon Uso, /d/ in 'den' (male) and the /k/ in 'ken' (one) are phonemes while 'den' and 'ken' are minimal pairs. Another example in Itu Mbon Uso is;

mman	'give birth'
nnan	'blind'

### 5.2. Complementary Distribution

When two or more sounds never occur in the same phonemic context or environment, they are said to be in complementary distribution. In English, /h/ cannot occur in the same environment with /ŋ/. Conversely, in Itu Mbon Uso, the palatal affricate /tʃ/ cannot occur in the same environment with the velar nasal /ŋ/. Therefore, both /tʃ/ and /ŋ/ are phonemes in Itu Mbon Uso and are in complementary distribution.

### 5.3. Free Variation

When two different sounds occur such that a substitution of one sound for the other in the same environment does not lead to change in meaning, the two sounds are said to be in free variation. In Itu Mbon Uso, as in Ibibio, 'udua' and 'urua' mean the same thing, even though the sounds /d/ and /r/ are distributed in each case, respectively. Therefore, /d/ and /r/ are in free variation. The same thing also happens in

ukod	'leg'
ukot	'leg'

Therefore, the sounds /d/ and /t/ are in free variation at word final positions in Itu Mbon Uso.

### 5.4. Distinctive Features

In order for two phonetic forms to differ as to contrast meanings, there must be some phonetic difference between the substituted sounds. The minimal pairs 'seal' and 'zeal' show that [s] and [z] represent two contrasting phonemes in English. We know that the only difference between [s] and [z] is a voicing difference. [s] is voiceless while [z] is voiced. It is this phonetic feature that distinguishes the two words. When a feature distinguishes one phoneme from another, it is called a distinctive feature. While English uses voicing as a distinctive feature in establishing a phoneme, this feature can also be used in establishing phonemes in Itu Mbon Uso.

However, we are going to illustrate how we used minimal pairs and initial, medial and final syllable and word positions of distribution to arrive at the fact that Itu Mbon Uso has seventeen (17) phonemic consonants. These consonants are made up of ten stops, four of which are nasals, two fricatives and one affricate, three approximants and one trill. We will also use the illustration we are about to show to prove the existence of the above mentioned number and classification of Itu Mbon Uso consonants by drawing the phonetic and phonemic charts of Itu Mbon Uso as shown below.



Table-1. The Phonetic Consonants of Itu Mbon Uso

	<b>bilabial</b> <b>vl vd</b>	<b>Labio</b> <b>dental</b> <b>vl vd</b>	<b>dental</b> <b>vl vd</b>	<b>Alveolar</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>palatal</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>velar</b> <b>Vl v</b>	<b>labial</b> <b>velar</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>uvular</b> <b>Vl vd</b>
Stop	p b		T	d		k	Kp	
Nasal	m			n	ɲ	ŋ	Nw	
Fricatives	β	F		S				
Affricates					tf			
Trill				R				R
Appro- Ximant					j		W	ʁ
Tap								

### 5.5. A Description of the Itu Mbon Uso Phonetic Consonants

With reference to table 1 above, the following are the phonetic consonants observed and witnessed in Itu Mbon Uso.

Consonants			Voiced	voiceless
(1)	[ p ]	bilabial		✓
(2)	[ b ]	bilabial	✓	
(3)	[ t ]	dental		✓
(4)	[ d ]	alveolar	✓	
(5)	[ k ]	velar		✓
(6)	[kp ]	labio-velar		✓
(7)	[m ]	bilabial	✓	
(8)	[n ]	alveolar	✓	
(9)	[ɲ ]	palatal		✓
(10)	[ ŋ ]	velar	✓	
(11)	[ɣw]	labial		✓
(12)	[ β ]	bilabial	✓	
(13)	[ f ]	fricative		✓
(14)	[ s ]	alveolar		✓
(15)	[ j ]	palatal	✓	
(16)	[w ]	velar	✓	
(17)	[ b ]	uvular	✓	
(18)	[ r ]	alveolar	✓	
(19)	[tʃ]	palatal	✓	
(20)	[ R ]	uvular	✓	

Itu Mbon Uso has an asymmetric consonant system. This is due to the fact that /k/ and /kp/ do not have corresponding voiced counterparts /g/ and /gb/. Moreover, /f/ does not have the corresponding voiced /v/. Oral stops are unreleased in final position except when they are followed immediately by a vowel. The oral stops are unreleased and, like Ibibio have geminate allophones except /kp/. The nasals also have geminate forms, which contrast with the single ones.

Table-2. The Phonemic Consonants of Itu Mbon Uso

	<b>Bilabial</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Labio</b> <b>Dental</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Dental</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Alveolar</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Palatal</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Velar</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Labial</b> <b>velar</b> <b>Vl vd</b>	<b>Uvular</b> <b>Vl vd</b>
Stops	p b		t	d		K	Kp	
Nasals	m			n	ɲ	ŋ		
Fricatives		F		S				
Affricates					tʃ			
Trill				R				
Approximants					j		W	ʁ
Tap								

Let us now turn to the description of each of the phonemic segments and highlight the distributional features of these sounds as they occur in Itu Mbon Uso.

#### 5.5.1. Oral Stops

There are six oral Stops in Itu Mbon Uso and these are /p, b, t, d, k, kp/.

(i) /p/

This is a voiceless bilabial stop and occurs in word/syllable final position only as in the following words.

bip 'ask' (question)

kpep 'teach'

top 'throw'

(ii) /b/

This is a voiced bilabial stop and occurs in word or stem initial and medial positions only as in the following words:

bip 'ask (question)'

bia 'yam'

ban 'sharpen'

bei 'pass' by

eba 'breast'

(iii) /t/

This is a voiceless dental stop and occurs in word/stem initial and also in word medial position. It also occurs in word final position and as an onset of the second syllable in a disyllabic verb. The geminate form /tt/ occurs in word medial positions only.

téi 'remember'

tùàk 'spin'

tát 'loosen'

itèn 'file'

ètá 'father'

itùrí 'darkness'

itiát 'stone'

The geminate /tt/ occurs as in

sitté 'uncork'

ɲwètté 'I have not written'

(iv) /d/

This is a voiced alveolar stop. It occurs in word initial and word medial positions. Examples are:

dáí 'sleep'

démé 'share'

údɔŋ 'thirst'

dép 'buy'

ndíà 'food'

édèbé 'cold'

édíp 'twenty'

(v) /k/

This is a voiceless velar sound. Its voiced counterpart /g/, is absent in Itu Mbon Uso. This sound has its occurrence in word/stem initial position and in all other positions – medial and final. Examples are:

kèn 'one'

kɔi 'vomit'

kánj 'deny'

ɲkètèŋ 'basket'

èkènyè 'old person'

itékèn 'six'

èkàrikà 'harmattan'

àkíkɔ 'cock'

èkék 'stammerer'

èbrètik 'black'

The phoneme /k/ has an allophone /kk/ which occurs intervocallically, where none of the vowels constitute a prefix. Example:

dàkká 'move away'

bɔkkɔ 'escape from'

(vi) /kp/

This is an implosive sound normally described as a voiceless labiovelar stop and like /k/, it has no voiced counterpart /gb/ even phonetically. Its distribution occurs in word/syllable and stem initial position as in:

kpùì 'beat' drum

kpá 'die'

óbúkpá 'guinea corn'

mkpátá 'seed'

ìkpátókpò 'shoe'

mkpang 'elder brother'

### 5.5.2. Nasal

There are four (4) phonemic nasal sounds in Itu Mbon Uso and these have allophones, which altogether make seven nasal sounds. The phonemic nasals are /m,n,ɲ,n,ɲ/

(vii) /m/

This is a bilabial nasal sound and it occurs in all positions and occurs both as a single and as double consonant. Examples of its distributions are:-

mkpàtà	‘seed’
mbènè	‘wall’
mfòrìdèm	‘men’s short’
ìmɔ	‘wealth’
mbɔm	‘pity’
mmúŋ	‘water’
úmìim	‘fear’

The geminate [mm] contrast with the single consonant. Examples are:

nèmé	‘discuss’
nèmmé	‘enjoyable’
dèmé	‘refuse to answer’
démmé	‘wake up’
(viii)	/n/

While /m/ was described as a bilabial nasal, /n/ is described as an alveolar nasal and it occurs in all positions. It also has a geminate that contrast with the single consonant. Examples are:

ndíá	‘food’
ntúŋ	‘money’
nsámá	‘beans’
ùnè	‘banana’
nnùm ùyàt	‘cap’
ànànkèn	‘nine’
útún	‘sunshine’

The geminate [nn] contrast with the single consonant. Examples are:

dɔnɔ	‘be smooth’
dɔnnɔ	‘slip’
sànná	‘move some distance away’.
(ix)	/ɲ/

This is the palatal nasal and it is a significant sound in Itu Mbon Uso. It occurs word/stem position at the onset of a syllable, medially and as a homorganic prefix before some palatal consonants e.g.

àŋŋà	‘horse’
ŋŋà	‘garden egg’
ékéŋé	‘old person’
éŋŋí	‘long stick’
ŋìimì	‘wring’
ntíŋá	‘a kind of insect’
(x)	/ŋ/

This is a velar nasal and it has two allophone /ŋ/ and /ŋw/. /ŋ/ occurs in all positions and has geminate form /ŋŋ/ which contrasts with its single counterpart. It also occurs as homorganic prefix before velar sounds e.g

ŋ-wá	‘feather’
ŋ-kɔp	‘clam’
ŋ-kà	‘club’
nkètèŋ	‘basket’
inuŋ	‘salt’
ásísíŋ	‘small’
dùŋ	‘dwell’
ekɔŋ	‘war’
sàŋá	‘walk’
yàŋá	‘peel off’
yàŋŋá	‘be intrigue’

The allophone /ŋw/ is as a result of the process of labialisation in Itu Mbon Uso. It occurs in word/stem initial position e.g.

ŋwɔŋ	‘drink’
ùŋwɔŋ	‘tobacco’
ŋwàn	‘woman’
ìŋwáŋ	‘farm’

### 5.5.3. The Syllabic Nasal

In addition to the above non-syllabic nasals, there are also nasals, which are syllabic, and homorganic with the following consonant. Such nasals constitute syllabic peaks in themselves and assimilate to the following consonant in place of articulation (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988). Essien (1990), has observed that nasals become syllabic when followed immediately by a consonant to which it assimilates in place of articulation. Examples are;

mbàrá	‘nail’
mmùŋ	‘water’
nsá	‘belly’
ndià	‘food’
ntài	‘bow’



nkètèŋ 'basket'

There is near complete assimilation in the case of labial dental consonants. Examples are;

mfɔt 'frog'

mfát 'rashes'

There is also near complete assimilation with labial velar consonant. e.g

mkpàŋ 'elder brother'

ŋkpɔ 'something'

ŋwàná 'fight'

ìŋwáŋ 'farm'

ùŋwàná 'light'

In the case of palatal sounds, the assimilation is partial, as in the following examples;

nɪn 'we'

nyimi 'wring' (clothes)

#### 5.5.4. Fricatives

There are basically two phonemic fricative sounds in Itu Mbon Uso. These are /f/ and /s/.

(xi) /f/

The asymmetric system in Itu Mbon Uso is also brought about because of this segment which lacks a voiced counterpart, /v/. /f/ occurs in words/syllable initial and medial positions as in the following examples

fàrí 'spit'

fáíyá 'be violent'

ífét-eto 'bark of a tree'

úfùmè 'blow of the wind'

mfòròidèm 'shirt'

éférímbièt 'heap of rubbish'

(xii) /s/

This phoneme is known as the voiceless alveolar fricative and it occurs in word/stem initial and medial positions. Like the first fricative /f/, it does not occur in word final position. /s/ occurs in the following positions;

sèt 'return'

sùgóré 'descend'

ńsá 'stomach'

ásísìŋ 'small'

ìsébé 'crab'

#### 5.5.5. Affricates

An affricate is attested phonemically in Itu Mbon Uso and the affricate is the voiceless palatal affricate

(xiii). /tʃ/

As already observed, the production of this affricate involves the combination of a stop plus a fricative. It occurs in the following words in Itu Mbon Uso.

étʃit 'heart'

ùtʃéré 'dawn'

íntʃikèn 'bat'

ètʃénwɔm 'stranger (guest)'

námétʃà 'right (side)'

tʃín 'refuse'

etʃòp 'lose something'

The affricate is attested in word initial/ medial position.

#### 5.5.6. Approximants

Itu Mbon Uso has three approximants and they are /j, w, ɹ/. The sounds /j/ and /w/ are produced with little or no obstruction of the airstream in the mouth. When occurring in a word, they must always be either preceded or followed directly by a vowel.

(xiv) /j/

This is a palatal glide. It is attested phonemically in Itu Mbon Uso and appears in words like:

jèm 'look for'

jìp 'steal'

jét 'wash'

ájàì 'good'

íjén úrúŋ 'mortar'

íjìp 'blood'

éjìbé 'red'

njá 'a type of tree'

(xv) /w/

This is a labial-velar approximant. It is produced by both raising the back of the tongue toward the velum and simultaneously rounding the lips. It occurs in word/stem initial and medial positions as in the words below:

wééŋ	‘console’
wàì	‘tear’
ùwémé	‘day’
ìwá	‘cassava’
òwòm	‘person’
ŋwèt	‘book’
ŋwá èbèk	‘beard’
(xvi)	/ɣ /

This is the uvular approximant sound. The tongue and lips are usually in the position for the production of the following vowel as the airstreams passes through the open glottis. This sound in Itu Mbon Uso appears in the following words:

kuxɔre	‘open’
étíɣé	‘okro’
tíɣá	‘kick’
bɔɣɔ	‘pass by somebody’

### 5.5.7. Trill

(xvii) /r/

The trill /r/ appears in Itu Mbon Uso. It does not occur in word initial and final positions. Examples are:-

èrí	‘thread’
èkùrì	‘axe’
ìtùrì	‘night’
dùrì	‘pull’
òsókɔrɔk	‘orange’

## 6. Summary

So far in this study, we have seen that part of knowing a language is knowing the phonology or sound system of that language, the inventory of phones, the phonetic segments that occur in the language, and the way in which they pattern. It is this patterning that determines the inventory of phonemes---the segments that differentiate words. We have also seen that what linguists look for in establishing phonemes in a language are: (a) minimal pairs (b) distinctive features and (c) complementary distribution and (d) free variation.

Itu Mbon Uso is spoken in Ini Local Government of Akwa Ibom State. The three other languages spoken in the local government are Ito, Iwere and Nkari, none of which has been documented. Itu Mbon Uso is a Lower Cross language and falls under what Essien (1990) calls ‘ibibiod language family’. A close look at the consonant system of the Lower Cross languages reveals that most of them have between 13 and 19 consonants. Itu Mbon Uso has 17, and it is among the Lower Cross languages with the alveolar trill /r/ (one of the rarest consonants in the group) and the palatal affricate /tʃ/. Itu Mbon Uso has 6 oral stops, 4 nasals, 2 fricatives, one affricate, 3 approximants and one trill.

## 7. Conclusion

The description of consonant segments in this study was done using the descriptive methods of analyzing consonants according to their place and manner of articulations and through the phonemic principle.

We have established seventeen phonemic consonants and these consonants are /p b t d k kp tʃ m n ŋ r f s j w b/. We are hoping that this work will serve as a motivation to other researchers to delve into other aspects of this language or explore more on the consonants of this language towards the development of orthography for Itu Mbon Uso.

## Suggestion for Future Research

As earlier started, this is the first ever attempt at a description of the consonant system of Itu Mbon Uso, a language in the Ibibiod group of languages. We know that the sound system of any language consists of the consonants and vowels in that language. This study was mainly on the consonants of Itu Mbon Uso. We therefore recommend that a detailed study of the vowel system of Itu Mbon Uso be carried out so as to provide a comprehensive study of the sound system of the language. This is toward an eventual development of orthography for the language. We can therefore consider this work as a background study for other researchers in the near future to improve upon.

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