Preserving and understanding the Medefaidrin language: a new contribution to documentary linguistics

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We describe a Documentary Linguistic approach to documenting and preserving for posterity the unusual case of a "spirit language", Medefaidrin, which was created, developed, and used by adherents of the Oberi Okaime religious group (Itu and Ibiono Ibom Local Government Areas, Akwa Ibom State, Niger Delta region of Nigeria).

The creators of the Medefaidrin language are Ibibio speakers. Medefaidrin is not simply a register of Ibibio, but distinctly different from Ibibio, and may arguably be classified as an artificial special purpose language. In the late 1920s and early 1930s when the Medfaidrin script was developed, Ibibio did not enjoy the status which it enjoys today (in fact, Ibibio did not have its own orthography until 1983, thanks to the Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio, an Ibibio sociocultural organisation and the linguistic work of Okon Essien). The Medefaidrin language generated so much interest that it attracted the attention of the colonial government, who set up a panel to investigate the group's activities. Tangentially, the Oberi Okaime script also aroused research interest at the International African Institute in the 1930s. After eighty years, the Medefaidrin script is in danger of disappearing.

We demonstrate a Documentary Linguistic (DL) approach to the modelling of Medefaidrin speech and writing, including established markup and database technologies and a new speech synthesis technique of microvoice modelling to verify the correctness of phonetic representations of the language. We define Documentary Linguistics as the theory and practice of modelling re-usable empirical language documentation on a solid text linguistic and computational basis. This emerging discipline is already mature enough to play an invaluable role not only in documenting but also in preserving and promoting endangered unwritten languages and scripts like Medefaidrin, and that use of advanced computational techniques from text and speech technologies is contributing to more efficient documentation.