

Description of Degema (provided by Ethelbert E. Kari)

Degema is a Delta Edoid language subsumed under Edoid, which comes under Benue-Congo that is in turn subsumed under the larger Niger-Congo phylum. It is presently spoken in two autonomous communities – *Usokun-Degema* and *Degema Town* – in Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. Corresponding to the names of these communities are two highly mutually intelligible dialects of Degema – *Usokun* and *Degema Town (Atala)*, respectively. By the 1991 population census, Degema is spoken by about 22, 000 people. This figure also represents the total number of people in the ethnic group.

Some typological features of Degema are tone, vowel harmony (Advanced Tongue Root), and noun classes. Other features include a basic SVO word order, a partly agglutinating, partly fusional, and partly isolating morphology, etc.

Degema is co-ordinate with other Delta Edoid languages – Epie-Atisa and Engenni – spoken respectively in Bayelsa and Rivers States of Nigeria. Degema shares a high percentage of cognates with these co-ordinate languages, although they are no longer mutually intelligible. That Degema has a high percentage of cognates with these languages is not surprising. Oral tradition has it that the Degema people emigrated from Benin (in what is now Edo State of Nigeria) around the Sapele area to Akinima (Eliabi) in Engenni, in the present Ahoada Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria. The date of emigration from Benin to Akinima is uncertain. From Akinima, they moved and settled, in what is today called Degema, on a portion of the Island called Ipokuma, which means ‘headland’ or ‘cape’ in the Degema language around the 15th century. The Degema people came out from Engenni in three autonomous groups – Usokun-Degema, Degema Town, and Ekomburu (Obonoma) led respectively by Ugu, Ekeze, and Obonogina.

Before they dispersed at Ipokuma to where each of the groups is presently situated, (Usokun-Degema and Degema Town further north on portions of the Degema Island distant from Ipokuma, and Ekomburu further south across the Sombreiro River on the Island where Abonnema in Akuku Toru Local Government Area of Rivers State of Nigeria is presently located), there were three dialects of Degema – Usokun, Degema Town (Atala), and Obonoma. With the passage of time, the Obonoma dialect became extinct.

Today, the Obonoma speakers speak Kalabari, an Eastern Ijo language, instead of Degema. Kalabari, a dominant and influential language, is the language spoken by the Abonnema people.

The emigration from Edo State also explains why Degema has some similarities with other Edoid languages.

The Degema language was committed to writing only recently, relatively though. Its orthography, *A Guide to Reading and Writing Degema* by D.S. Abangwo, was first published in 1975, and revised in 1977 and 1996. Other published materials include *Ụbi Ṭutu Enu Degema* (Degema Reader I) by David S. Abangwo and Daniel S. Okpara (1977), revised in 1998, and *Degema* (Languages of the World/Materials 180) by Ethelbert E. Kari (1997). There are a couple of articles describing different aspects of the language published in learned journals. A number of undergraduate long essays and graduate theses, describing aspects of the language, exist in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

There is no standard variety of Degema yet.