
THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN ENGLISH IN SELECTED UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigerian Pidgin evolved as a result of language contact with the British colonialists whose date preceded the emergence of universities in Nigeria. It was absolutely, at that time, a linguistic index of the lower class. However, over the years, the language has changed in status considering its speakership and new functions. This paper investigated varieties of the Nigerian Pidgin with special focus on the variety being used on the Nigerian university campuses. Questionnaires were administered on selected students on six universities cutting across the six-geo-political zones in Nigeria. It was discovered that even the Nigerian Pidgin spoken by undergraduates vary and each variation is characterised by the mixture of slangy expressions and/or is code-mixed with lexical items from the indigenous languages. The paper concluded by foregrounding the positive contributions of the Nigerian undergraduates to the status, structure as well as attitudes of people towards the Nigerian Pidgin.

Key words: Pidgin, Nigerian Pidgin English, literacy level, variants

Introduction

Pidgin historically begins, as Quirk et. al. (1985:28) observe as simply a language marked by traditional interference used chiefly by the prosperous and privileged sections of a community, represented by the unskilled and illiterate class of the society. This situation is however not so with the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).

It is quite interesting to note that what actually started as a contingency language between the white merchants, who later turned colonial masters, and their black traders has now become an elitist campus language-spoken among the teeming population of the Nigerian students in higher institutions of learning. Thus, at common rooms, kiosks, gossip centres, viewing centres, play grounds, rally grounds, relaxation joints, movie grounds and a host of other meeting points where and when students are relieved of their academic routines, they are seen interacting lively in NPE.

This paper therefore intends to examine the use of NPE as well as determine its popularity among Nigerian students on selected campuses based on sociolinguistic principles. Variables like domains of use, sex, age, ethnicity, status among other relevant ones will be considered.

Sociolinguistics can be defined as the study of the relationship between language and society (Hudson 1990, Holmes, 2001). This implies that as soon as we embark on the study of WHY we speak in CERTAIN ways we are already within the realm of sociolinguistics.

Variables like sex, status, literacy level, exposure, setting, idiosyncrasies and socio-cultural values, and how they influence a person's linguistic behaviour lie within the scope of sociolinguistics (Adeyanju, 1998).

Through one or more of these factors, an individual identity of a speaker or a cultural practice in a community is signalled. A culture is better understood and promoted through language because language serves as a mirror to a society and its cultural practices. Brooks (1969:4) observes that:

It is through the magic of language that man comes eventually to understand to an impressive degree the environment to which he lives and, still more surprising, gains an insight into his own nature and his own condition.

Since languages cannot be the same in terms of the assigned roles and values (Hymes, 1974), therefore, no language is inferior to another (Fishman, 1997). This is because where two or more speech communities come in contact, a lingua Franca or common language of communication emerges (Stockwell, 2002). The emergent language can serve as a substrate or an auxiliary to the main or superstrate one(s) or serve as just a means of business transaction.

The Origin of Pidgin

Opinions differ on the etymological genesis of the word pidgin. Edwards (1994) first traced the word to Portuguese *ocupacao*- which means business or *pequeno*- babytalk-or simply baby. He said the word could as well be linked to the Amerindian *pidian*- which means people. He reported that some scholars claim that the word originated from Hebrew *Pidgin* or *pigeon*- which means barter or a bird, respectively. Hence, from the foregoing varying conceptual opinions, Edwards (1994:42) defines pidgin as a baby-like and rather superficial repetitions associated with trade communication (Edwards 1994:42).

Holmes refutes the assertion and claims that pidgins are real languages not baby talk, because they are used for serious purposes (p. 81). Decamp (1987:175) describes pidgin as an incidental communicative language within a multilingual setting which is the native language of nobody. Its vocabulary according to Decamp, is donated by the socio-politically dominant language in the original contact situation, most especially, with the European imperialists. Pidgin is therefore an amalgam of the main, foreign or superstrate language and the indigenous or substrate language. Stockwell (2002) observes that because of the overwhelming colonial expansion of the British imperial power, around a quarter of all pidgins and Creoles have English as element (p.18).

Quirk et. al. acknowledge that unlike the Creole, pidgin is used to replace the native language in a micro-speech community. This implies that pidgins are restricted to a few practical issues or events. Holmes also agrees that pidgins are spoken more for an effective than referential purpose. They evolved to serve a narrow range of functions in a very restricted set of domains (p. 84).

Pidgins are of considerable interest to sociolinguists because of the influence which the society exerts on their forms and functions. Hudson (1990: 62) confirms:

Each pidgin is of course specially constructed to suit the need of its users which means that it has to have the terminology and constructions needed in whatever kind of context.

The simplicity and resilience of pidgin are always perceived differently by people. The positivists (e.g. Akinnaso, 1989; Adegbija, 1994) see these qualities as an asset and a boost to easy acquisition of the language. On the other hand, others (e.g. Brann, 1985; Elugbe, 1995) view the language contemptuously and describe it as a debased form of language.

Decamp (1971), Hymes (1971) and Hudson (1990) give a synopsis of the characteristics of pidgins as follows:

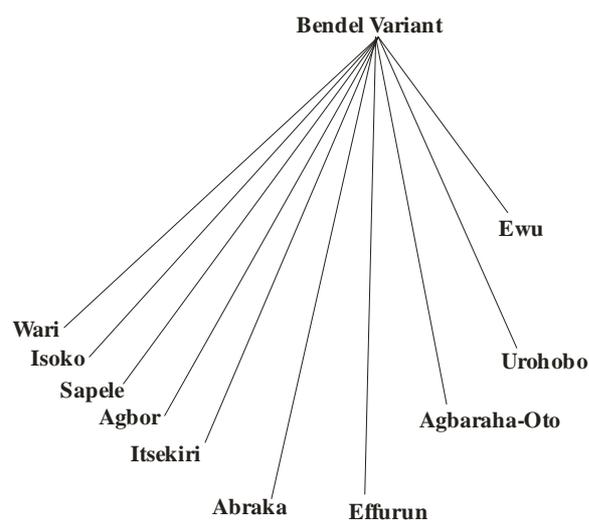
- i. Elimination of grammatical devices like inflections, plural markers and tenses.
- ii. The use of reduplication as intensifier.
- iii. Ability of a word to have semantic extension i.e. expanded meanings.

Nigerian Pidgin English

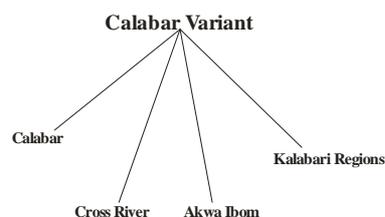
Obiechina (1984), Elugbe (1995) and Egbokhare (2001) are unanimous in their opinion that the Nigerian contact was through the coast. Nigerian Pidgin, also called Nigerian Pidgin English (NigP.or NPE) is an English-based pidgin spoken as a kind of lingua franca across Nigeria. It is referred to simply as Pidgin, Broken English or Broken. Its superstrate is English while any of the three major languages is used as a substrate language. Ihimere (2006:296) reports that, Nigerian pidgin has become the native language of approximately 3 to 5 million people and a second language for at least another 75million.

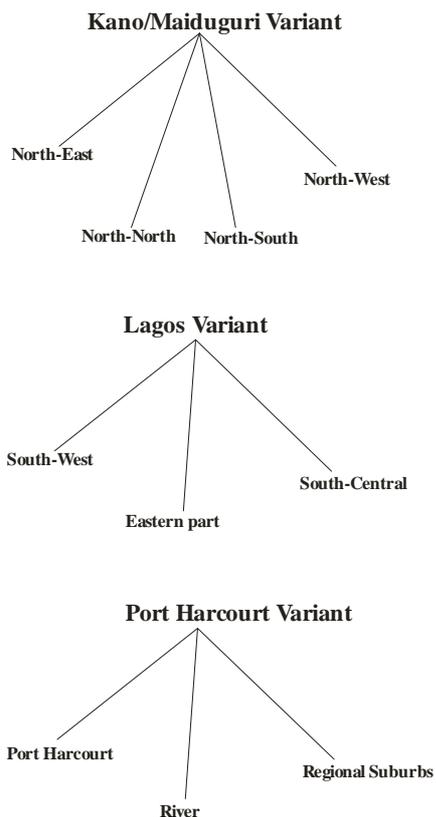
There are different variants of NPE in Nigeria. Obiechina version shall be considered because its divisions of NPE into variants is exhaustive and critical. Below is a diagram which summarizes Obiechinas classification of NPE. The variants identified are five, namely: Bendel, Calabar, Lagos, Kano/Maiduguri and Port Harcourt variants.

i.



ii.





A variant is characterized by a preponderant influence of its substrate language on the form and usage. Sometimes, a speaker code-switches from Standard English to NPE in order to indicate, deliberately, that the mood of discussion needs to change. More importantly, as (2005, 64) asserts, since a speaker's degree of competence in English which has already become clear depends to a great extent on his/her educational level. This practice is noticeable among the youths who often differentiate between the fun time and business time.

An investigation into the use of NPE is necessary in order to understand the social structures of the society and the language behaviour itself. Writing on NPE, Jowitt (1990:14) also remarks that recently NPE has attained the feat of dignity not only among the illiterates but also the literate members of the society. He notes that the use of pidgin signals proximity and informality and, that it is good for cracking jokes.

In his contribution, Adebija (1994) strengthens the utility of NPE and even proposes the elevation of Nigerian Pidgin English as a national language. He cites its grass root popularity and cultural neutrality and easy acquisitions as some justifications. He acknowledges, however, the likely problems to be encountered. For instance, Adebija mentions aura of inferiority or stigma, cultural baselessness and lack of indigenous status as the major clogs to his proposals. He concludes that:

Nigerian Pidgin English has a far much larger number of speakers than what has been referred to by Bamgbose (1980:2) as Standard Nigerian English.

The research shows through questionnaire and oral interview that Nigerian Pidgin English can be categorised into three.

- i. Ordinary NPE spoken by the vast majority of Nigerian People. Deubar (2005) classifies NPE spoken in this category into educated and less educated. While the former features more English lexis clothes in almost good grammar while the latter does not.
- ii. Wafe-rank is a special variety popular among the Nigerian students and which of course is the major focus of the paper. Oral interview reveals that this category evolved at Ajegunle, a suburb of Lagos City, mostly inhabited by low-income earners including young musicians who perform at club houses where the majority of those in attendance are students and socialities of low or average status. However, Wafy as being popularly referred to has spread beyond its originators to virtually all nooks and crannies of students settlement. Musicians like Daddy Showkey, African China, Lagbaja and Charlie Boy, to mention but few are examples of the apostles of Wafe Ranky.
- iii. Incidentally they enjoy tremendous audience and patronage from the youths (most especially students from higher institutions) as well as from the socialities. This Campus variety of NPE is characterized by switching back and forth between broken English and standard English, (Oloruntoba, 1992:127) Examples are:
 Guy, how your side now? (Guy, how are doing?)
 You deysight that shawty? (Did you see that lady?)
- iv. Hooligan's version popularly associated with the touts, area boys or hoodlums. It is mostly vulgar and features lots of slang from musicians. The speakers are mostly found in Lagos, most of whom are not educated. For instance:
 That guy too dey yarn dust. (That young man doesn't talk sensibly).

Why you step me now, dem fence your eyes (Why did you step on me, Are you blind?)

The first type is the commonest but is not our focus now. The second and third types share some things in common especially in terms of slangs. However, the third is more densely muddled with slang than the second. Slang present an alternative source of words into NPE. Slangs is characterized by neologism, clipping, sound symbolism and metaphoric elements. On campuses where there are students of diverse ethnic background, students prefer to use NPE due to specific social consideration or the fear of committing flaws while using Standard Nigerian English.

Method of Data Collection and Classification

Sociolinguists agree that the field is both theoretical and empirical. To collate the data, six Nigerian University campuses were selected for the distribution of questionnaire as well as oral interview. Respondents and interviews were randomly selected from two universities in the north namely: Bayero University, Kano (BUK) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU) Univeristy of Lagos, Lagos (UNILAG) and Univeristy of Ibadan, Ibadan (UI) in the West and Imo State Univeristy, Owerri and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in the South East were selected as regional representatives. Two hundred respondents were selected from each school.

Data Analysis

Over the years, NPE has expanded, stabilized and probably creolized. This is because at times, linguistic resources like borrowing and coinage are resorted to in order to cope with day-to-day emerging functions and concepts. For instance, the word solo" is a coinage used

to mean calm down. This and many more have been introduced by the Nigerian youths on campuses and hoodlums in the society swell-up the lexical register of their pidgin typologies.

On campuses, NPE expressions are commonly used to perform the following functions:

1. To herald musical concert of interest within or outside campuses.
2. To womanize or talk about ladies or ladies discussing their male friends.
3. To express basic domestic needs like- eating and clothing.
4. For interpersonal/private discussion.

Naturally, being adolescents, students are full of youthful exuberance. They attend parties and visit other recreational centres on campuses. NPE is sometimes used to spread information during such outings. Below are examples.

- i. We get runs this weekend or show dey for town this weekend (there is going to be a party in town this weekend).
- ii. You hear say jive dey for campus or im go happen for campus tonite? (Have you heard that there is going to be a musical show on campus tonight?).

Talks about ladies dominate students discussion outside lecture rooms. This theme is often expressed in NPE at different relaxation centres on campuses. Here are few examples:

- i. Honestly, the babe fine no be small. The baby na cowbell (Honestly, the lady is charmingly beautiful. The Lady is also big-breasted).
- ii. Na her aristo be that (that is her intimate male man friend) also known as sugar daddy in Nigerian English context.
- iii. You sweet Omo (you are very beautiful, young lady).
- iv. Tear im wrapper (have sex with her).

Sometimes, students use NPE to request for favour. Through this use of NPE, in this situation, they seem not desperate about their request while in actual sense, they are. For instance, they beg for money or food stuff from their colleagues. Let's consider few examples:

- i. I wan grej make I no yakata for ground (I want to eat) so that I won't fall down or collapse.
- ii. Hunger dey wire me (I am hungry)..
- iii. Come wack (come and eat)
- iv. I beg raise me with ten fibre (please lend me N100.00).

Note that grej and ten fibre are slang.

For interpersonal or private discussion, NPE is used for various purposes. It can be used to show solidarity, establish and maintain relationship. In addition, it functions as the language of identity. Close pals use it to praise or admonish one another. Here are few of such expressions: as collated from the questionnaire.

- i. Kasala don burst (there is an imminent/looming danger)
- ii. Alam don blow (The secret has been exposed).

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- iii. No kwam, carry go (no problem, you can go on).
 - iv. You go kpeme (you will be left out).
 - v. I dey kawa o (I am leaving)
 - vi. Make we waka go (Let us go or leave)
 - vii. I beg maintain (please, be calm)
 - viii. Gentleman no dey inside alute (Every student is the same)
 - ix. Katakata don burst (Trouble has occurred).

Moreover, for casual greetings, NPE expressions are commonly used by the students. Sometimes, a request for favour follows these greetings. Here are examples:

- i. How runs? (How is the work?)
- ii. What's up (How is it?)
- iii. You dey live (you are in enjoyment)
- iv. Make we yarn (Let us talk).

The speaking of NPE on campuses signals intimacy among the speakers and as such, it does not, in most cases, indicate serious issues. Consider these expressions:

- i. A beg kill that light. (switch off the light).
- ii. Which levels now? (what is going on?)
- iii. Make I bell you? (let me/I will call you on phone)
- iv. I dey chill for you o, no dull me. (I am waiting for you, don't keep me waiting).
- v. Free me. (Allow me/Leave me alone).
- vi. Guy, lock me up, make we dey row. (Guy put that aside and let's get going).

Further discussion on the use of Pidgin English on campus will require a brief discussion on the centrality or significance of Lagos in Nigeria. Not until 1991, Lagos had been the capital city of Nigeria since the colonial administration. Being the most populated and commercially busiest city in Nigeria, people from different parts of the country come for fortune-seeking or/and business transaction. Even, those who live in or have been to Lagos are considered civilized by those who do not have this privilege. This position gave Lagos an influential status. It is the meeting point for people of diverse socio-cultural and educational background. Given these differences, NPE serves as the most suitable bridge for the people's communication gap. Gilman (1979) further describes NPE as a neutral lingua franca per excellence in the neo- African society.

Furthermore, Lagos still remains the state with the highest number of musicians. The influence of these musicians, of course, in spreading slang among the youths is overwhelming. In addition, the role of press in popularizing a concept is tremendous, and south west is considered to be the seat of the most viable and critical press in Nigeria (Idiagbon, 1999). Incidentally, Lagos is the most influential state in the south west and the region is predominantly inhabited by the Yoruba race. This, in a nutshell, accounts for why a considerable number of Yoruba words and slangs found their ways into NPE. A campus is a micro-society that draws its own inhabitants from a larger society. As such, Lagos influence affects how NPE is being spoken on Nigerian university campuses.

Not all slang in Nigerian Pidgin derive their source form the Lagos influence, some slang are exclusively being used by cliques of students who belong to particular cults or societies. In this sense, slang are highly technical and can be understood by those who belong to such groups, that is- the associate or initiated. Slang in this perspective, normally generate negative impression from the non-initiates, students, religious bodies as well as other campus community members. Students involved are also aware of this societal reaction and so they hardly use them except where they consider safe and appropriate. Examples of such NPE expressions are:

- i. Wetin be your logo (identify yourself/who are you?)
- ii. The guy don gaz (the man is dead)
- iii. Shine your eye well (be careful!)
- iv. Chill (be Calm)
- v. Fashy the guy (neglect the man/lady)

The core register of the initiate are difficult to come by, more so, this research is not keen at probing into that area. Code-mixing is another common feature of campus NPE. Words from Nigerian indigenous languages are inserted into or mixed with it. But pidgin is nobody's language and it is evident that student-speakers freely code mix with any of the indigenous languages irrespective of the ethnic background of the speakers and irrespective of the location of the campus. It is not uncommon therefore to hear Hausas in Bayero University, Kano or Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, code-mixed with Yoruba or Igbo Language. Here are some examples of code mixing Hausa with English in NPE expressions.

- i. Yawa don gaz (trouble has occurred).
- ii. I no dey for this wahala (count me out of this trouble). It is noteworthy to state that *Yawa* and *Wahala* are loan words from Hausa and Arabic languages respectively.
- iii. You go sha garri da ruwa? (*Would you drink garri and water?*)
- iv. Za mu tafi *If you no come back on time. (We shall leave if you don't return on time).*
- v. *Make you come buy me rowan sanyi (Kindly buy iced water for me).*
- vi. *Commot for my room with your dogo nturanchi (Would you leave my room if you must speak queen's English complex).*
- vii. *You no no say exam matters ba wasa ba! I(*Don't you realise that exam matters are not something to joke with*).*
- viii. *Make we go hear labari for his mouth. (Let's go and listen to what he has to say).*
- ix. *Wetin be your wahala for my matter sef? (What is your business in my matter?).*

Code mixing Igbo with English in NPE

- i. Chineke sebi sey my hand no dey (God knows that I know nothing about itO).
- ii. Biko see me see trouble (please, bail me out of this conspiracy).
- iii. You dey make iyanga (you are too proud).

- iv. Una no see that the girl di kwa too fine! (Can't you see that the girl is charmingly beautiful!)

Code mixing Yoruba with English in NPE

- i. Wetin de sele (What is happening).
- ii. You sweet Omo (you are a beautiful lady. Omo literally means a baby but it is technically used to represent a lady).
- iii. Joo comot for road (Please, leave the road/excuse me).
- iv. These girls don Jag an (These girls are flirts)
- v. My phone don lana (My phone is faulty/explode)
- vi. Ogbeni, bone that class joo. (Mr. please, don't attend the class).

Apart from the fusion of lexical items from the Nigerian indigenous languages into Nigerian pidgin, Yoruba slangs like 'Orobo' and 'lepa' among others have been successfully introduced into the Nigerian Pidgin English. Here are two examples of conversational fragments based on Wafy showing how slangs are used or introduced to Nigerian pidgin English.

- i. A: Ah! You sef dey para. You no wait for me, you come de bale (slangs underlined)
B: Omo, you won try. You no see say person won die.
- ii. The man dey solo level. (The man is cool-headed)

As you de look my eyes so, you no see say I never chop for two days now. Omo, I have to lem serious before I pai-in. (slangs underlined) Below are some slang words and their English correspondence

Words: standard English correspondence

1. Para : vex
2. Chop : eat
3. Pai-in : die
4. Lem : eat
5. Bale : eat greedily

2. A: You don dey feel. Anyway, break this money for me.

B: If I go break am for you, you go drop Shandi.

Words : standard English correspondence

- i. de feel : to pose as an important personality
- ii. Shandi : twenty naira.

Conclusion

The paper has beamed its search light on the uniqueness of the use of the NPE on Nigeria University campuses. It examines how students have contributed to the uniqueness of form and functions of this variety i.e. the campus Pidgin English. One therefore established that the

impact of Nigerian students as a community in creating or/and sustaining positive attitude towards Nigerian pidgin underscores the assertion that a new prestigious status for the language has come to stay. In addition, this work further strengthens the findings of the positivists like Jowitt, 1991; Adegbija, 1994 e.t.c. that the language is no longer viewed with contempt, and that its growing popularity portends a promising future especially among the new elitist generation. The research does not however see Nigerian pidgin English as being ethnically neutral but rather considers it as being ethnically-balanced. The disparity between these two terms, in my own usage, is that while the former means a language that does not identify with any ethnic group (which of course is not true), the latter signifies that the language accommodates substrate languages contributions to the form and meaning of this pidgin English.

This is therefore another token contribution to the existing large volume of works on Nigerian pidgin English. Finally, as far as the Nigerian University campuses are concerned, and by extension other tertiary institutions/campuses in Nigeria, the speaking of this variety of Pidgin is a veritable way of demonstrating comradeship and solidarity among students of the Nigerian higher institutions of learning.

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