

Exploring the linguistic status of the Nigerian Pidgin

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Abstract

Pidgins are minimal and makeshift languages which are the results of language contact, developed for the purpose of communication, particularly in multilingual societies. Being spoken in many countries of the world, it is recognized as a contingency language in the absence of a central communicative code. Nigerian Pidgin is one of the pidgins spoken in the world. It has gained wide currency having permeated the Nigerian linguistic ecology. As a result, this paper discusses it with the purpose of highlighting its position in the Nigerian linguistic situation by recourse to the stages of language development. Drawing from the basic principles of Role and Reference Grammar (RRG), this paper argues that language is employed solely for communicative purposes. By this, the paper emphasizes while corroborating that languages perform functional roles despite their limitations. Conclusively, the Nigerian Pidgin in its stage in language development occupies the status of a promoted language (PL) and also a tolerated language (TL).

Keywords: Explore, Linguistic status, Nigeria Pidgin

Introduction

The Nigerian Pidgin and the English language are the two most spoken languages in Nigeria. Existing side by side, they function in different capacities as a lingua franca. However, the Nigerian Pidgin which was used as a language of trade is developing in leaps and bounds, following the linguistic realities of the country.

Pidgins are new language categories that develop when speakers of different languages come into contact with each other and have a need to communicate. Classically, they are minimal, marginal and makeshift languages which evolve to perform communicative roles among plurilinguals without a common language code. Reinecke (1964), Todd (1974). Many Pidgin languages arose when colonial powers came into contact with the colonized, as they spread around the world. Pidgin languages function as non-native lingua franca used solely for the purposes of trade, labour and colonial contact. It is a sought of compromise between two or more languages, characterized by simplified grammar; and represents a simple vocabulary from a dominant group's language. As a contingency language, it is used by a group of people who do not have a central communication code.

In time past, Pidgin English, a simplified form of English was used among the 'non-educated' class for communication; but in recent times, it has gained wide currency, such that both the 'educated' and the 'highly educated' use it, especially in informal situations. Currently, this variety of English is used in the media; print and electronic, alike. Its wide usage accounts for the agitation for a proper adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as a national and official language. Coincidentally, Nigerian Pidgin has become creolized in some parts of Nigeria, such as Rivers, Edo, Cross River and Delta states. This evolution has changed its linguistic status to a lingua franca. Chinvure (2012).

The multilingual and multicultural situation in Nigeria facilitates the use of Nigerian Pidgin as a means of communication. Nigerian Pidgin is derived from a combination of English and indigenous languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Edo, etc. It is a code of communication shared by Nigerians from diverse ethnic affiliations, their linguistic backgrounds notwithstanding. Consequently, the Nigerian Pidgin plays a unification role; as it serves as an identification marker to

Nigerians who have well over 400 indigenous languages, without a functional national language.

Theoretical underpinning

Role and Reference Grammar (RRG) is a descriptive framework for language analyses which accounts for language diversity. It analyses language acquisition and language processing. RRG has as its major proponents, William Foley and Van Valin (1980, 1984, 1997, and 2003) who argue that meaning and function are fundamental to the grammatical structure of any language. Role and Reference Grammar is a structural-functionalist theory of grammar which describes the processes involved in multilingual speeches, in addition to how it is acquired by the learner. The three components of RRG are syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Relying on this model enables building systems that work with the world's languages given that it is closer to reality than a system with letter sequences. The view here is that grammatical structure can best be understood with reference to its meaning and communicative function. It is on the basis of the RRG that the work explored the linguistic status of the Nigerian Pidgin.

History of the pidgin language

Pidgin is a universal concept being an aspect of a popular speech which evolved from contact situations. Different speculations on the origin of Pidgin abound. Some literature trace its origin to the Chinese version of the English word 'business.' Naro (1973). Some other accounts trace its origin to the Portuguese word, 'ocupacao', meaning occupation. Rickford (1988) associates it with a Hebrew word, 'Pidjoin' which means 'barter.' Pidgin is a language contact phenomenon which arises from the need for people from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate. It plays a significant role in the socio-economic life of people and would sooner or later become the most widely

spoken language in Africa, given its prominence as the language of communication in multilingual African states. Faraclas (1996). Pidgins begin as restricted communication codes meant to “fulfil specific communication needs.” In this light, Elugbe (1995) defines it according to function and situation.

Development of the Nigerian Pidgin

The current English-based Nigerian Pidgin is preceded by the Portuguese-based Pidgin of the 15th century. The origin of the Nigerian Pidgin, identified variously as Pidgin, Nigerian Pidgin English (Mafeni 1971, Elugbe and Omamor 1991), Pidgin English or Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin (Mann 1993) can be traced to the trade contacts between the natives at the Nigerian coastlines and the Europeans, represented by the Portuguese Merchants of the 15th century, the French, the Dutch, and ultimately, the British missionaries and colonists of the 18th century. Elugbe (1995), Hancock (1969) in Mann (2009). Sadly, Illah (2001) observes that the Nigerian Pidgin is the result of the unfriendly disposition of the colonial masters towards Nigerians, who they felt were not good enough to speak a similar language with them. So, for the purpose of trade and contact, the pidgin language evolved as an effective communicative strategy.

According to Elugbe and Omamor (1991), for a language to qualify as a pidgin, its grammatical structure and its vocabulary must be sharply reduced. Also, the resultant language must be native to none of those who use it. These aptly describe the Nigerian Pidgin which is characterized by a limited, restricted, simple grammar; and vocabulary.

The Nigerian Pidgin is a hybrid language which has the English language as its superstrate, though with minimal grammar and a preponderance of vocabulary. The indigenous languages served as the substrate which accommodated the language of the English man considering the difficulty in learning the multiple languages spoken by the natives in that

contact situation. Elugbe and Omamor (1991). Being endogenous, the pidgin language flourished most in the Niger Delta, Rivers and Cross River. Its spread and prominence in various other cities is a modern phenomenon arising from the linguistic situation in the society. To this end, Agheyisi (1971) espouses:

The urban settings are generally characterized by multi-ethnicity and therefore, multilingualism, as a result of their being the centers of trade and industry, skilled and unskilled government corporation jobs, education, etc. People migrate to them from both the immediate rural surroundings as well as other parts of the country. As a result, there is often much need for a lingua franca to make possible the various kinds of social interaction, generally to facilitate communication between members of the various ethnic and linguistic groups.

Over the years, the Nigerian Pidgin experienced some diachronic development in the lexical, semantic and syntactic features which distinguished it from Broken English, the type of English spoken as a result of poor mastery of the Standard English by non-native speakers. The notion that there is no inherently bad language is reflective of the Nigerian Pidgin reckoned as a developing language capable of enjoying high prestige considering its current status in the linguistic ecology of Nigeria. It is therefore for this reason that Wilhelm Von Humboldt cited in Aitchison (1991) states that, “there can never be a true moment of standstill in language... language is in a continuous process of development.”

It is argued in several quarters that Nigerian Pidgin has evolved from being a Pidgin language to a Creole language in most parts of the country, particularly the urban areas where it functions as a lingua franca. This is supported by Omamor

(1982), Elugbe and Omamor (1991), Chinvure (2012), Gbala (2009), Schnukal and Marchese (1983). In identifying these areas, Gani-Ikilama (1990) states: “Pidgin is central to the lives of many Nigerians, especially in places like Bendel, Cross-River and Rivers State.”

The development and spread of the Nigerian Pidgin to the north, west and southwest Nigeria is not rapid because of the presence of the indigenous languages of Hausa and Yoruba which are spoken by quite a good number as lingua franca. Its sociolinguistic vitality is active in urban settings given the multilingual reality and ethno- linguistic backgrounds of the dwellers. Though Nigerian Pidgin is acquired informally and used in informal settings; over the years, it has progressed to become a developed language which is deployed by both young and old, literates and illiterates; most surprising is its use in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Igboanusi (2008), Faraclas (2008) and Jibril (1995) observe that it is the language with the highest number of users. Nigerian Pidgin is also reckoned as a first language among speakers from the South-South region of Nigeria. Igboanusi (2008).

Linguistic status of the Nigerian Pidgin

A proper analysis of the developmental stages of a language would help understand the linguistic status of Nigerian Pidgin. These developmental stages include:

- Sole official (SO) language: This is the language recognized as the only official language of government. It includes French in France and Quebec.
- Joint Official (JO) language: These languages co-occur with at least one other language. Example: English and French in Cameroon; English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria; German, French, Romansh and Italian in Switzerland.

- Regional Official (RO) language: These are languages used traditionally within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population. Example: Yoruba in Southern Nigeria, Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, Hausa in Northern Nigeria.
- Promoted Language (PL): This language lacks in official status, but is made use of by government agencies. E.g. WAPE in Cameroon, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, etc.
- Toleration language (TL): The existence of this language is recognized but ignored E.g. Nigeria Pidgin.

Based on the features described in these developmental stages, the Nigerian Pidgin could be identified as occupying the status of both a (PL) and (TL). On the status of Nigerian Pidgin, Deuber (2005) succinctly observes:

Although a major lingua franca, it has no official recognition; even without any policy statements, it performs a growing range of functions, including, for example, that of a medium of public broadcasting, but no efforts have been made to develop it to be able to cope with these functions, as has been done for the major and to some extent also for minor indigenous languages.

Corroborating the observation above, Akande and Salami (2010) highlight the recognition by the government, of the significance of the Nigerian Pidgin in the linguistic ecology of the country as it is deployed during electioneering campaigns and other awareness campaigns, given its features of inter and intra-ethnic connections. Apparently, Nigerian Pidgin is expanding its frontiers both in status and domain despite the poor recognition and low prestige it is accorded.

Varieties of Nigeria Pidgin

Though Nigerian Pidgin demonstrates the linguistic features of the area in which it is spoken, it has been argued in the literature whether these ethno-linguistic variations which basically come in form of phonological interference are dialects of Nigeria Pidgin. Obiechina (1984) identifies some variants of the Nigeria Pidgin as Port Harcourt, Bendel, Calabar, Lagos, Kano/Maiduguri variants. Others include Warri, Sapele, Umuahia, Benin and Onitsha. These varieties are however, markedly different from other notable bad English, such as Broken English and Special English.

Benefits of the Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian Pidgin grew out of the need to communicate with the Europeans who visited the coastline of Nigeria. Therefore, it performed a rudimentary role in order to save the linguistic challenges associated with the contact situation. Subsequently, it was used by multilingual Nigerians who have no lingua franca, as a means of communication. Apparently, the Nigerian Pidgin which was earlier identified and recognized as a marginal or makeshift language defied the concept of marginality given that it is used “for more than the most rudimentary forms of communication.” Elugbe and Omamor (1991). For this reason, it suffices to say that the Nigerian Pidgin, just like the English language plays a communicative role in multi-ethnic Nigeria. Since English language is not spoken by everyone, especially those who do not have access to formal education, Nigerian Pidgin is adopted by its speakers as a ‘way out’ in order to bridge communication gap as “the process of acquiring English was decidedly longer and more tedious than that of ‘picking up’ Nigerian Pidgin.” Elugbe (1995). Consequently, it functions, albeit simultaneously with the English language as a lingua franca, and saves the ethnic bias or sentiments that could arise

from the choice of an indigenous language as an official language. The use of the Nigerian Pidgin in the propagation of national values, ideas, political and socio-economic development, peace and unity portrays it as “a marker of identity and solidarity.” Akande (2008). It is indispensable as a socio-cultural outlet to initiate and sustain conversation. It could therefore be acquired as a third or fourth language besides the mother tongue (first), English (learnt at school) as the second language, and possibly, the community language (third). The Nigerian Pidgin is a convenient form of communication between and among people from extreme linguistic diversity. Advertising agencies use it more than other languages, native in the Nigerian environment.

A language is considered as a national language if it meets certain criteria some of which include: i. the language has to be an indigenous language ii. the language must be widely spoken. Elugbe (1990). Interestingly, the Nigerian Pidgin meets the two criteria and therefore is considered qualified as a national language.

Furthermore, in keeping with the stipulations of the National Policy on Education where the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is to be used as a medium of instruction at the pre-primary level of education and the first three years of the primary school, the Nigerian Pidgin is adjudged suitable as it occupies the position of the language of the immediate community where there are bilinguals in native language and Nigerian Pidgin.

The relative ease with which the Nigerian Pidgin is acquired accounts for its creative impetus. It is quite convenient for speakers and users to pick lexifiers from the repertoire of Nigerian languages, which reflects in the song writing and drama series like, *Samanja*, *Village Headmaster*, *The New Masquerade*, *Hotel de Jordan*, etc.

In the area of entertainment, the use of Nigeria Pidgin has a comic effect and appeals to the audience as Ituen (1985)

observes: "... the Nigerian experience has shown that drama presentations done with a combination of Standard English and Nigerian Pidgin probably have greater audience reception than those done solely in the Standard English idiom." Indeed, Nigerian Pidgin shares similar characteristics with other languages, which include borrowing from other languages in order to increase and expand its linguistic repertoire. As such, it enriches its vocabulary from different languages, some of which include the Nigeria indigenous languages.

Limitations of the Nigerian Pidgin

The dearth of language attitude studies in Africa has been identified as one of the major limitations in the development of the Nigerian Pidgin. The result is that there is no adequate plan made towards proposing a more formal function for pidgin given its functional utility; not only as a language contact phenomenon but also, as a lingua franca.

The Nigerian Pidgin has undergone the decreolization process in its growth as an acceptable language, little wonder therefore, the presence of indigenous languages in its phonology. This is aptly presented in the sentence:

His fader has some bildins in taun (He didn't die poor, he had much property.)

The example above indicates that the Nigerian Pidgin does not have an independent orthography, but relies heavily on the English writing system. There is a preponderant use of exact English words like plenty, hungry, die and property; and a slight altering of words such as 'fader' and 'bildin'. The use of the plural suffix -s is seen in 'bildins', and a considerable level of inconsistency in the use of the pronoun 'he', first as 'e' and then, 'he'.

Conclusion

Looking at the linguistic map of Nigeria, the paper concludes that Nigerian Pidgin transcends ethnic, religious and socio-cultural boundaries, serving as a communication bridge between and among the people. The sociolinguistic reality in Nigeria reveals that Nigerian Pidgin is used in both formal and informal situations, by majority of Nigerians who are bilinguals. Based on this reality, it is pertinent to acquire the English language, the Nigerian Pidgin or another language, in addition to the major Nigerian languages. Despite the limitations arising from the characteristic features of the Nigerian Pidgin, there is an ever-growing sociolinguistic vitality among the culturally and linguistically heterogeneous people of Nigeria. Although the Nigerian Pidgin is marked by low prestige and social bias, it is widely in use, despite lacking official recognition. Suggestively, Nigerian Pidgin could be better developed in order to elevate its linguistic status by engaging in an intensive and extensive systematic study of language attitude for adequate language plans and functional language policies. Also, attention should be given to proper codification of the language for optimal representation. A proper and more suitable orthography, should be developed.

Finally, the Nigerian Pidgin reflects the sociolinguistic situation of an ultra-multilingual society given its functional utility.

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