Investigating the history of Pidgin English
Early Highlife recordings from Ghana

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1. Introduction

• history of Pidgins/Creoles: mostly sociohistorical outlines from a macro-sociolinguistic perspective

• fewer detailed investigations of structural evolution
  – language specific, e.g. Bruyn (1995)
  – cross-linguistic, e.g. Baker (1987)

• based on written texts. Problems:
  – most texts only 2nd hand via non-native speakers
  – often written down in retrospect

• very few studies based on actual language recordings: AAE ex-slave, hoodoo recordings

• early recordings of PCs rare. Pilot study: opening up a new source of historical spoken data
Pidgin in Ghana: quick facts

- *Pidgin dey!*
- GhPE part of West African PC dialect cluster
  - used by smaller section of society
  - functional domain more restricted
  - more stigmatized than in Nigeria, Cameroon

- popular belief: Pidgin in Ghana not homegrown but imported from Nigeria (cf. e.g. Amoako 1992: 48)
Previous studies using song lyrics

comparatively few studies, including

• Trudgill (1983)  
  British pop-song pronunciation
• Kreyer & Mukherjee (2007)  
  style, corpus-linguistic approach
• Brato & Jansen (2008)  
  accents in British (indie) rock
• Miethaner (2005)  
  blues lyrics as historical corpus data
  Existing transcripts + author’s additions
• Coester (1998)  
  Nigerian PE in Fela Kuti’s songs
2. Highlife in Ghana

• Popular dance music from West Africa
• Term: late 19th century, coined in 1920s
• English speaking West African countries Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone
• African – Western fusion style (cf. Collins 1989: 221)
• Early days: palm-wine / guitar band highlife
• Palm-wine Highlife associated with (Pidgin) English
• Dance-band Highlife
• 1920s: professional bands
• Context/audience: British and American soldiers

• Golden age of Highlife 1950s
• Recordings: London – Accra, Ghana
• Languages: Twi, Ga, Ewe, Hausa, Pidgin, English etc.
E.T. Mensah, the King of Highlife

• Emmanuel Tetteh Mensah (1919-96)
• 1947: Mensah joins Tempos Band
• 1940s and 50s: Popularization of Highlife
• Extensive tours: e.g. Nigeria, Sierra Leone
• West African Audience
Highlife Archives

- Archiv für die Musik Afrikas / African Music Archive. Mainz, Germany (Hauke Dorsch)
- Centre for World Music. Hildesheim, Germany (Wolfgang Bender)
- GBC Gramophone Library
- Gramophone Records Museum and Research Centre of Ghana. Cape Coast, Ghana (K. Sarpong)

http://www.gbcghana.com/gramophone/aboutus.html
3. Pidgin in early Ghanaian Highlife

• focus on classic Highlife, 1950s/60s
• sociolinguistic distribution StE-PE
• StE in topics from public, political formal sphere:
  – Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Ghana
    King Bruce & Black Beats “The Queen's Visit”

This is the day five million Ghanaians will go gay
Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip will be here that special day
We’ll drink and dance the whole day
And put on kente fine
On that Thursday twelfth November 1959
StE in topics in the public sphere (ctd.):

- the achievements of Kwame Nkrumah
  E.T. Mensah “Ghana Freedom”
- Pan-Africanism
  E.T. Mensah “Ghana, Guinea, Mali”
- inflation
  E.T. Mensah “Inflation Calypso”
- socialism
  Ramblers Dance Band “Work and Happiness”
• PE in topics from private, informal sphere:
  – love and marriage, marital problems
    The Red Spots Band “Coffee and Tea”
    
    I don't want any coffee tea
    Coffee tea go hot me belly
    I don't want any big mama
    Big mama go beat me like that
    I don't want any pretty girl
    Pretty girl go around chop money
  – troubles with children/alcoholism
    E.T. Mensah “Day by Day”
• sociolinguistic distribution: PE only used by male singers
The structure of 1950s GhPE

• modern GhPE has a reduced TMA system as compared to other WAPEs
  – no past/anterior *bin*
  – no completive/perfective *don*

• 1950s/60s GhPE: *bin, don* absent
  
  *That time I return back from business*  
  *My wife run away* (E.T. Mensah “Don’t Mind your Wife”)

• WAPE/Krio *na* (focus particle, equ. cop)
  – marginal to absent from contemporary GhPE  
  (Huber 1999:235)
– *na* not found in 1970’s 3rd Generation Band
“Because of Money” - equative copula = *be*:
  • money be something
  • money be nothing
  • money be human power
– but found in E.T. Mensah’s “Day by day”
  • *Na* her friend go be *na* boy o
  • If you born pikin *na* girl
  • And the beer them both *na* take o
    (na take them dey take the beer o)
4. Conclusion: Problems and potentials

- problem of teasing Pidgin apart from StE:
  - StE-Pidgin continuum
  - some structures are the same in StE and PE
  - code-switching, borrowing make it difficult to establish where StE ends and PE begins

I give my money to my wife
For make me chop (x3)
That time I return back from business
My wife run away
Don't mind your wife (x3)
You can get more chop from bar
• for phonological analyses
  – quality of records, overlap music/chorus
• biography of singers → which variety of Pidgin?
• dates of composition, recording, publication
• discography → recordings in Ghana or abroad?
• influence of other varieties: SLKrio, NigPE, etc.
• not spontaneous speech but written to be sung, restricted by rhyme and metre
• lyrics = short texts, not large corpus

Potentials and outlook
• acoustic, phonological analyses also possible
• more songs?
References


References


