

CULTURAL INFLUENCES AS INPUTS OF DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA PIDGIN

By

C. Ailende Ativie

Novena University, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

So much has been discussed, in the literature, of the emergence of pidgins around the world as a language of contact. Pidgin has since developed from a *makeshift* language into a fully crystallized and expanded language today. It has transited, over the decades from a minimal pidgin through a stabilized pidgin onto an expanded pidgin and now, in parts of the Niger Delta in Nigeria, involving people of dissimilar cultural linguistic backgrounds, to becoming a Creole.

The aim of this paper is to describe the burgeoning sociolinguistic situation of the Pidgin language, as we attempt to pigeon-hole the inherent semantic and pragmatic usage of the language, arising from substrate influences which derive from the various Nigerian local language cultures. It speaks volumes of a ready acceptance of the new form of Pidgin which signals a readiness for national integration in Nigeria despite obvious sociocultural and linguistic differences among its speakers countrywide.

2. Origins and development of Pidgin

The English based pidgin which is spoken in Nigeria was cultured in the Niger Delta region of the country. Many critics of the language argue that pidgin originated as a result of contact between European traders who came, sailing along the West African coast and met the peoples in the region of the lower Niger tributaries. Evidence abounds of materials found in original manuscript sources of trade voyages between Europe and Africa, from the fifteenth to nineteenth century, which lie presently in archives and in printed sources in London, Paris, Rome, Lisbon and The Hague. This body of evidence, in their ontological state, attests to the fact of Pidgin use in the extant but moribund Benin kingdom of Nigeria and along the trading coast of West Africa up to the Bight of Benin, and a little way hinterland. Until recent as the 1980s when Pidgin began to gain greater significance all around the Nigerian country, it had remained basically a trade language among communities or among people who do not speak each other's language. This is besides the old thinking that Pidgin was the language used by people of little or no education and generally, the language of those with lower social economic status. And this gave it the

semblance of a stigmatized language. For this reason, the Pidgin language was repudiated by the educated elite in Nigeria for so long. And for that length of time, linguists in Nigeria did pay little or no attention to Pidgin, which was why it lacked, until latterly, a standard (written) model because it is learned informally.

By this very fact, Pidgin had no fixed convention of orthography; no standardization, until the naissance of the Naija Languej Akẹdẹmi (NLA), a school which seeks to develop and to defend the Pidgin language in Nigeria. Indeed, Pidgin became stabilized somewhat when it began to acquire certain norms of meaning, pronunciation and grammar with variation, though, resulting from the transfer of features from speakers' first languages. Arising from the twin factor of time and broadening of contact between the peoples of Nigeria and migrants into the country, the Nigeria Pidgin gained a forward leap in its development and growth to assume an extended proportion of use especially in the Southern parts of the country.

The diversity of linguistic groups in Nigeria, it must be stated, tended to create some medley in the Pidgin (lexico-semantic and pragmatic) usage amongst the older generation of users of the language in the country. But such diversity of usage, today, in some sense, enriches, to a large extent, the lexicon of the language which is enhanced by the many new words and expressions from the majority and minority languages, as could be used in combination even in a single sentence by the younger generation of speakers of the new wave Pidgin language. And because the language is fast spreading in the multicultural and multilingual society of Nigeria at large, different dialects of the language abound with as many local varieties or sociolects as there are major speech communities that have adopted the use of the language, ranging from one geographical location to another. It follows, therefore, that Pidgin in Nigeria is heavily influenced by substrate languages in lexis, phonology, syntax and semantics although, essentially, it is English lexified; the main language from which it derives its superstrate influence. Thus, the lexical, phonological, syntactic and semantic meanings that derive from the Nigeria Pidgin rely heavily on the languages and cultures of the host regions or communities where it is spoken. See, for instance, the expression: **Ọdịọn na di rat we de put hol ọp ọt**. This means "Ọdịọn is the rat that drills a hole into a cooking pot". Semantically, this statement presupposes that "Ọdịọn is a traitor or a sell-out". Again, we have: **Ọmọnigho tek shem chop winch**. This expression denotes that Ọmọnigho ingested witchcraft willy-nilly [for being too shy to turn down the offer in order not to offend the giver]. The semantic connotation here is that

Ọmọ̀nigho agreed to terms and conditions that were not agreeable with her, or that she acquiesced regardless. In this respect, the Nigeria Pidgin has become, for most of its users, a language of cognition.

Pressure from cultural practices of the environment in Nigeria is modifying on the use of Pidgin overall as it draws influence from the local regional dialects where it is spoken. Like elsewhere, Pidgin in Nigeria, initially had no native speakers, but at the moment, the language finds *nativity*, as it were, amongst its present-day users whose various regional language backgrounds serve the cultural inputs which, to a large extent, influence the positive development of the language in our day. Thus the Nigeria Pidgin could be said to be transiting through a like-process of nativization via influences of language cultures. Cultural influence, therefore, is part of the development of the Nigeria Pidgin which involves introducing into the language new concepts, values and modes of interactions as a reflection of the Nigerian regional language cultures. Ayo Bamgbose (1995) says this could be matched by the adoption of certain ways of life which relate to modes of dressing, food, religion, trees, musical instruments, titles, etc. The result is a transfer of patterns from the first or regional language of the speaker into phonological, lexical, semantic and syntactic patterns of the second language as with the Nigeria Pidgin nowadays. Furthermore, Bamgbose speaks of the new *form* “not [only] limited to the usual features of transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns ... [but] also concerned with the creative development of ... [a language] including the evolution of distinctively Nigerian usage, attitudes and pragmatic use of the language” (21). He identified three aspects of the process of development viz: the linguistic, the pragmatic and the creative development which Iyang Udofot (2003) re-branded the linguistic, the lexico-semantic and the morpho-semantic features respectively.

3. Linguistic features of Nigeria Pidgin

The English related pidgins in use, according to George Yule (2000), “are characterized by an absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a limited vocabulary” (234). Southerland and Katamba (1996) observe that pidgins “usually present a syntactic structure that is comparatively simple and they exhibit certain characteristic relationships to their source languages. They normally reflect the influence of their higher status (or dominant) languages in their lexicon and that of the lower status language in their phonology (and occasionally syntax)”

(572). Strictly speaking, this is what the Nigeria Pidgin represents. It must be stated clearly here that besides the ancestor language influences on the West African pidgins, English supplied more of the vocabulary to Nigeria Pidgin while the Nigerian local languages have more influence on the grammar of the language which tend to have a simplified structure in its morphology, phonology and syntax. It is unlike the English system which has inflections for gender, number and person on the noun and tense, and verb negation, et cetera. Users of the Nigeria Pidgin often express themselves in words and sentences that have certain peculiarities of grammar and meanings which bear carry-over effects from their cultural ways of speaking onto Pidgin. Such ways are now being adopted by other speakers from the other regions of the country, in addition to their own modes of speech –all to complement the new form of Pidgin usage. Consequently, a new mode of the Nigeria Pidgin speech is gradually emerging among its speakers in general with some features that remain peculiar to the language overall, seen in the following sub-headings.

3.1 Phonological features

Phonologically, the sound system of the Nigeria Pidgin is simple, having almost entirely eliminated the elaborate morphology of English. A general trend in the segmental and non-segmental features and in the functions of the Nigeria Pidgin can be discerned as follows:

3.1.1 Segmental features

The Nigeria Pidgin, far more than the English language, uses fewer of segmental features which show tendencies of approximation in the Pidgin from English language pronunciations as in the following:

Consonants

The Nigeria Pidgin speech is involved in the substitution of the symbols of consonants of the speaker's first or regional language to replace, for example, the voiced and voiceless dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ with the voiced and voiceless alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ as in **dat** for *that* and **tin** for *thing*. This pattern is also repeated with the velar nasal /ŋ/ sound which is replaced by the alveolar nasal /n/ sound as in /nɔθŋ/, a word which, in itself, is pronounced [nɔtin] among speakers of Pidgin in Nigeria. The voiced and voiceless post-alveolar affricate sound /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are replaced by the voiced and voiceless post-alveolar fricative sounds /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, as in the pronunciation of “**church**” /tʃə:tʃ/ which in Nigeria Pidgin is often pronounced “**chọch**” [ʃɔʃ]. This is also true of “**judge**” /dʒʌdʒ/ which is pronounced “**jọj**” /ʒɔʒ/, etc. Generally speaking,

there is a transfer in the use of diagraphs, of the “labial-velar” plosives /kp/ as in “**kpẹlẹ**”, as well as in the bilabial plosive and velar affricate sounds /gb/ and /gh/ respectively, both in the example word “**gbeghe**”, etc. from the stock of consonant sounds of the Nigerian speakers’ first languages into Pidgin. This also applies to the nasal sound /ɲ/, which is realized in the palato-alveolar region in the words “**nyanga**” and “**nyanfun nyanfun**”, etc. Strictly speaking, this sound is different from the English alveolar nasal sound /ŋ/ which is equally functional in Nigeria Pidgin. Another innovation in the example of a consonant used in the local language-dominated Pidgin is the palato-alveolar nasal sound /ɲw/. This sound is used in the realization of the word “**ngwa**” to mean *now* or *ok*, a variant of “**odinma**” in the Igbo cultural language which has found its entrance into the Pidgin language expression. Again, we find in Pidgin, the omission of consonant sounds before vowels (and sometimes vowel sounds before consonants) like “**im**” for *him*, and “**e**” or “**i**” for *s/he*. Also, we have **tafficator** [tafiketɔ] for **trafficator** (a Nigerian English neologism and corrupt form of the native English words “traffic indicator”). We notice, however, that it is only in the plosive sounds, i.e., the bilabial /p b/, the alveolar /t d/ and the velar /k g/ sounds, as well as in the labio-dental fricative /f v/ sounds in which we find equivalence in the Pidgin and English pronunciation sounds. Also to be found in Nigeria Pidgin is the insertion of vowel sounds into consonant clusters in, for instance, the word “strike” /straik/ which some speakers of Pidgin would sometime pronounce as [sitiraiki] while they pronounce “straight” as [sitiret], etc. Yet we notice the devoicing of final consonants in words like **bɔis** (boys) unlike what obtains in English where the final consonant is voiced in [bɔiz]. The same applies to the Pidgin word **dats** (that’s) which in English is pronounced /ðætɪz/, etc. It must be stated here that Elugbe and Omamor postulated on some twenty-five phonetic consonant sounds of Pidgin, used in the Niger-Delta and parts of Southern Nigeria; seen in the data provided by Mafeni (1971) and Oyeade (1983), while the authors consider the sounds to be mostly influenced by substrate or base origin languages of Nigeria Pidgin.

Vowels

It has been established that a stabilized variety of the Pidgin language, like the Nigeria Pidgin, is made up of five short *vowel* sounds. With the extended or expanded sociolet of Pidgin spoken in the Niger Delta, two additional vowels are added to give a total of seven vowel sounds overall /i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u/ which contrast with the known twelve English vowels. Essentially, vowels in Nigeria Pidgin are of short length. Interestingly, the language has in its vowel system, tone markings of the grave [˘] and acute [ˊ] types, and sub-dots to differentiate [e] from [ɛ] and [o]

from [ɔ], to show that the letters are sounded in particular ways, as well as to give different meanings to words in which the sounds appear. This is unlike the English system, for instance, which sound is distinctive with seven short and five long vowels, but without tone markings. Minimally, the Nigeria Pidgin vowels can co-occur freely to form a set of diphthongs in the language such as the [ɔi], [au] and [ai] sound sequence in **bɔi** (boy), **shaut** (shout) and **mai** (my) respectively. Through the Nigeria Pidgin vowel sounds, speakers of the language around the country maximally realize the Monophthongisation of diphthongs and triphthongs. However, the Nigeria Pidgin neither uses the basic English diphthongs [the /əu/, /uə/ and /ei/] and triphthong [the /aiə/ and /auə/] sounds as a result of its different system. For this reason, a diphthong in English, say, in the word “take” /teɪk/ will be pronounced [tek] in Nigeria Pidgin, and an English triphthong as “tyre” /taɪə/ will be [taya], etc.

3.1.2 Non-segmental features

Strictly speaking, the Nigeria Pidgin is a tone language, like most African languages, with high and low distinctions. It is at the same time syllable-timed. Indeed, Mafeni, like Oyeade above, have shown that tones are used in Nigeria Pidgin to distinguish between the lexical and grammatical meanings in a significant number of minimal pairs. In addition to this, the South Western variety spoken in Warri, Sapele and Uvwie has some distinctive intonation with varied speakers, some of whom use the language as mother tongue. Thus, Oyeade argues that the Nigeria Pidgin is a “pitch accent language” where “both the tonal and the intonational pitch systems have become ... intertwined” (71). Besides other characteristics, we notice the relocation of stress on syllables by accent in the production of sounds in Nigeria Pidgin words like [prɔ'pa], the equivalence of the English word “proper” which a speaker of English would preferably pronounce ['prɒpə]; [bɛ'ta], the equivalence of “better” which the same speaker of English would preferably pronounce ['betə]. This much goes for the pidgin word [gad'rum], the equivalence of “guardroom” which pronunciation in English is ['ga:dru:m], etc.

3.2 Lexical features

Because the Nigeria Pidgin is English-related, most of its vocabulary, and by extension, its word pronunciations tend to sound like English, its *higher* lexifier language. By this very fact, the outlying influence of the Nigeria Pidgin is, indeed, English while the language has, as its substratum and underlying influence, the Nigerian local languages. Without a doubt, much of its earlier vocabulary derives from the remnants of the ancestor languages of the nucleus pidgin –

Portuguese, Dutch, and actually, a few from Spanish and French, most of which were handed down to the English in their first and second comings for trading and missionary purposes (see *Benin and the Europeans 1485 to 1897*, 1977). And such words, from the aforementioned Western European languages of higher status influence on West African pidgins became relexified and sometime, had their meanings extended to produce **pikin**=(Portuguese, *pequeno*)=small one/child/infant, **hala**=(French, *holloer*)=holler/yell/shout, **sabi**=(Portuguese, *saber*; Spanish, *sabe*)=savvy/know/practical knowledge, **alele**=(French, *aller*)=go/move, **vẹks**=(French, *vexer*)= vex/angry, **palava**=(Portuguese, *palavra*)=speech/trouble/dilemma, **bọku**=(French, *beaucoup*)=many/plentiful/abundance, etc. These, and many more, have been retained in the present-day Nigeria Pidgin lexicon and usage. Added to this is the loan translation/creation from the Nigerian indigenous languages which beef up the vocabulary of the language to give it new domains of use. Besides the earlier examples provided in section two of local word inputs, such loan creation from the Nigerian indigenous languages, which have not by themselves experienced morphological changes nor relexification like their Western European language counterpart examples above, includes local words, adopted and now used by the generality of speakers; words like **yanga**=(Hausa)=pride/vanity, **wọwọ**=(Edo/Delta)=ugly/unattractive, **ọga**=(Yoruba)=boss/master, **isi-ewu**=(Igbo)=goat-head delicacy, **agbero**=(Yoruba)=motor-park tout/uncouth, **wayo**=(Hausa)=trick/deceit/sophistry, **una** [from the word *unu*]=(Igbo)=[plural form of] you, **shakara**=(Yoruba)=show-off/bravado/, **tatafo**=(Edo/Delta)=gossip/tell-tale, **jọọ**=(Yoruba)=I beg of you/please, etc. all serving to enrich the lexicon of the Nigeria Pidgin. Again, we have examples of words belonging to everyday register of food, dress, insult, interjections, titles, etc. as loan words into the Nigeria Pidgin, emanating from different Nigerian language cultures.

Certainly, the Pidgin language, like many languages in the world, at the moment, is a mixture composed of elements from foreign and many Nigerian local sources. This gives the language a unique character because going by the current tradition of lexicon expansion, the Nigeria Pidgin ceases to be a product of one clear historical evolution.

3.2.1 Lexico-semantic features

Undeniably, speakers of the Nigeria Pidgin device certain linguistic means to extend their vocabulary via lexico-semantic and pragmatic features arising from mother tongue influence which is transferred into Pidgin. Through the processes of multifunctionality, polysemy and

circumlocution, the lexicon of Nigeria Pidgin have been influenced by European and African lexical sources including morphological and semantic changes in the processes of lexical loaning/retention, coining, semantic shifts, reduplication and calquing. This, according to Nicholas Faraclas (1996) includes, among others, compounding, prepositions, serialized verb constructions, ideophones, etc. Again, expressions that bear the semantic extension of meanings can also be found in Nigeria Pidgin usage most of which two base words or compound words are combined to form a coinage, or a new word with an extended meaning derived, such as:

- **tai-fes** – to bear creased brows when upset
- **waka-jugbe** – to roam aimlessly
- **skata laf** – to break into sudden laughter
- **pik res** – to break into a sudden race
- **swit-maut** – the art of sophistry
- **bad-maut** – the art of sarcasm, et cetera.

3.3 Morpho-semantic features

The Creative development or morpho-semantic expressions are found in the direct transfer of Nigerian local expressions into the Pidgin, or expressions created into the language through morphological processes, having unique and clear-cut semantic implications from their traditional meanings. Certainly, there is a morphological process of a free morpheme or the base form of a (single) word that can stand on its own but which combines with another free morpheme to become two compound morphemes. Such two morphemes often come together to present a new coinage of a unique meaning, seen in some of the examples above such as: **swit + maut = swit-maut**, **pik + res = pik-res**, **skata + laf = skata-laf**, **tai + fes = tai-fes**, **bad + maut = bad-maut**, etc. Yet, Janet Holmes adds: “words generally do not have inflections, as in English, to mark the plural or to signal the tense of the verb” (91). Like most pidgins, therefore, the archetypal and correct Nigeria Pidgin expressions contain structures which lack inflectional suffixes on nouns, such that the possessive ‘s as well as the plural -s are not to be included in the structures, **di man haus** (i.e., **The man house**) to mean **the man’s house** and **tri hankachif** (i.e., **Three handkerchief**) to mean **three handkerchiefs** respectively. And, finding a commonality with the pidgin of its origins, the Nigeria Pidgin system of modal expressions, in their roots and inflected forms – shall/should, can/could, will/would, may/might – have but one simplified system of marking tense in the present continuous form: [fit ...] or [go fit ...]; (this latter form,

obtained in some basilectal usages) to express possibility or necessity, is used as a paradigm for all of the modals. Further examples of creative/morpho-semantic expressions in Nigeria Pidgin usage will be found in the following expressions:

1. **A bẹg, a nọ fit dai.** (Oh no! I cannot work myself to death/bring myself to ruin)
2. **Odjugo dọn opun ai tiyẹ.** (Odjugo now has a sense of wisdom)
3. **Hm-m, yu dọn hama!** (Surely, you have hit a jackpot!)
4. **God dọn bọta mai brẹd.** (Now, my prayers are answered)
5. **A bẹg, mek yu nọ puọ san san fọ mai garri.** (Please don't [pour sand into my meal of garri] ruin my chances)

Much of creative development also occurs in Pidgin literary writings where idioms, witty remarks and figurative expressions are translated from a speaker's cultural language into the Nigeria Pidgin to reflect the character of the language.

3.4 Syntactic features

The Nigeria Pidgin has a Subject/Verb/Object (SVO) sentence structure. It shares same characteristics with other pidgins: "word order is fixed; there is little or no inflection; negation usually involves a "no" word in front of the verb; nouns and verbs are regular; the ... vocabulary is used creatively; and speakers use local idioms, metaphors, and proverbs" (*Encarta Dictionaries*, 2008). As noted by Elugbe and Omamor, the speech or vocabulary of the pidgin spoken in the Niger-Delta sounds like English though, but "not so the structure that emerged when Nigerians tried to string these words together" (9). Essentially outstanding are two or one other characteristic, which are exceptional in the sense that they follow the pattern of structures from most Nigerian local languages. Such features include:

The omission of articles before titles and proper nouns in a sentence like "**If [] C.M.A. se dat a du sọmtin, mek a se a nọ du am?**" (*Skeleton*, 61), "**[] Dẹvu bẹn yọ nẹk**" (*Skeleton*, 69) and "**ivun [] gọymẹnt nọ de laik am**" (*Skeleton*, 70), etc.

On the other hand, we notice with most speakers the inclusion of the morpheme **-o** as a topicalizer, which helps to avoid positing a phantom verb "be" in the following words/expressions: "... tafficator-o [**tafiketọ-o**], mirror-o [**miro-o**], bumper-o [**bomba -o**], ..." (*Skeleton*, 63). It is common knowledge that within the discourse-related properties of the internal information structure of topic and focus of a language, the lexical domain noun phrase in

structures like “be it the traffic-indicator”, “(be it) the mirror” or “(be it) (even) the bumper” is assumed to be the structural layer at which predicate-argument relations are defined (see Enoch Aboh, 2004). But far more than English does, the Nigeria Pidgin optimizes on the exchange of information between speaker and hearer.

3.5 Pragmatic features

Some of the instances of the manner in which Nigerian cultures have impinged on local pidgin usage bear testimony on the rule of language use typical of the Nigeria Pidgin in native situations. Bamgbose notes that the pattern of indigenous greetings is reflected in the use of such expression as *sorry* (expression of sympathy e.g. to a person who bashes a foot accidentally against a stone, or to someone who had just had a misfortune), *well-done* (greeting to anyone at work), *thanks for yesterday* (appreciation for favour done the previous day), *till tomorrow* (a greeting which may stand for “good night”), et cetera which definitely have found their way into Nigeria Pidgin from Nigeria English usage (a superstratum influence to the former). Other examples are found in: **Politeness and respect**, **Solidarity**, **Greetings**, etc.

5. Conclusion

This essay has proved that Pidgin is not only communicative but also, it constitutes a total cultural experience in the Nigerian social milieu. Going by its ready acceptance by all, we are confident to say that Pidgin in Nigeria has become the transcendent criterion for national integration. It represents the pulse of the nation going by its present rate of use across board. Although speakers of the Nigeria Pidgin use the language with a lot of *freedom* and *creativity* (Elugbe, 287), there arises the urgent need to codify this language in some official quarters (as in the Naija Languej Akẹdẹmi endeavour) for normative reference and to achieve national and regional integration.

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