

**COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN
SPEAKERS**

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian nation is said to be multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Another acknowledged fact also is the complexity of the linguistic situation. Accounts abound of the number of existing languages in the Nigerian polity. Out of the numerous indigenous Nigerian languages, none serves as the nation's official language. Three languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba serve as regional and co-official language while English is the official language. In linguistically heterogeneous states like Rivers, Delta, Edo. Etc., where none of the three co-official languages above is adopted, the problem arises as to which of the numerous indigenous languages should be used as state language or co-official language. Unofficially however, the communication gap is bridged by the use of Nigeria Pidgin, which has acquired native speakership in most of the cities. This paper sets out to investigate the communication problems the speakers of this language encounter in their day-to-day activities, within and outside their immediate linguistic environments. We discovered that irrespective of the important roles Nigeria Pidgin play, especially that of facilitating communication, the speakers encounter various communication problems including that of social unacceptability. This is because there has been little or no practical effort by sociolinguists and other stakeholders to evolve a workable standardization programme that will raise the sociolinguistic status of the language. The paper recommends steps that could lead to the development of a standard variety of Nigerian Pidgin, which would in effect give it a sociolinguistic vitality that will lead to its social acceptability.

INTRODUCTION

Communication problems in a multilingual speech community may arise when speakers of one of the languages in use are at a disadvantage because of the sociolinguistic status of their language within the said speech community. Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Several past studies on the linguistic situation in Nigeria have provided useful observation on the complexity of the linguistic situation. For instance, there are varying accounts of the number of languages spoken in Nigeria by linguists and language experts based on approximation and estimation. Emenanjo (2003: 73), listed the following accounts by “(Coleman 1958) 250,(Otite 1990) 374, (Bamgbose 1992) 400 languages.” There are so many other accounts with different figures.

These numerous languages have undergone one type of classification or another. Various linguists and sociolinguists have adopted different approaches in their analysis of the majority/minority, major/minor notion. (Ndukwe 1990:81, Williamson 1990:118, Essien 1990:115, Emenanjo 1985, Awonusi 2007) . Bamgbose (1992:3) for instance suggests ‘major languages for Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba and ‘main’ for languages, which by virtue of population and recognition

are dominant in the states; 'small group languages' for smaller languages.

Bamgbose above goes on to justify the classification of languages by saying that

With almost four hundred (400) languages, some ranking must be done based on factors such as number of speakers, status in education, acquisition as a second language, and availability of written materials.

The 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria , section 51, and the National Policy on Education of 1977,(revised 1981 and 1998), confer the majority status on Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These languages are also referred to as decamillionaires given their multi-million speakers, and functioning as local lingua francas , as well as regional or state languages in areas where they are spoken (Brann 1986, Awonusi 2007). The millionaire languages in Nigeria such as Efik, Edo, Ibibio, Fulfude, Tiv, Idoma, Igala and Kanuri, have a minimum of about a million speakers. There are still other languages which Emenanjo (1985) regard as minor or micro-minor. They are the small-splinted group languages, which are mainly spoken by a handful of speakers mainly as domesticated languages. In addition to all these languages, are the English language which is Nigeria's official language (1976 constitution: 51), and the Nigeria Pidgin which has recently gained currency as the language of wider communication in most linguistically heterogamous cities of Nigeria.

THE NIGERIA PIDGIN

Linguists use the word Pidgin as the label for speech varieties that develop when speakers of two or more different languages come into contact with each other and do not know each other's language. (Southerland R.H and Katamba F 1996:572, Elugbe & Omamor 1991:1). Pidgins are used by speakers with different language backgrounds, to fulfill certain restricted communicative purposes, typically trade. (Romaine 1994: 163)

Nigeria Pidgin (NP), sometimes referred to as 'substandard English, broken English, or bastardized English is a native language to approximately 3-5 million people in Nigeria. It is a second language (L2) for another 75 million (en.Wikipedia.org). NP belongs to the language family of West African Pidgin English which was the lingua franca spoken along the West African coast during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. British slave merchants & local African traders developed this language in the coastal areas in order to facilitate their commercial exchanges. This languages spread up the river systems in the West African interior because of its value as a trade language among African of different tribes. (Crystal 2003). Some writers are of the opinion that NP and the Pidgin English in Ghana and the Cameroon could have arisen for the exportation

of Krio to Nigeria and those other places. (Elugbe & Omamor 1991:16). Like most West African English based pidgins, NP structure derives its vocabulary from English, and much of its sound system from the grammar and syntax of the indigenous Nigerian languages. As Mafeni (1971) states, "Nigeria Pidgin...is itself relatively complex and exhibits variety in form and function from community to community". Elugbe & Omamor (1991::48) states that "the linguistic diversity of the substrate situation ensures that there will be different dialects of NP even if they are all mutually intelligible". It is not therefore surprising to note that NP has many varieties, according to the users. Major varieties of the NP are however spoken in areas Igboanusi (2001:361) refers to as "ethnically heterogeneous areas such as Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja and other large cities where it serves as a lingua franca". This conforms to Mafeni (1971) statement, that "Nigeria Pidgin is essentially product of urbanization".

That the NP serves as a language of wider communication is not in doubt. That it equally bridges communication gap and facilitates communication in sociolinguistic situations where there exists no other mutually acceptable language of communication is also not in doubt. Why then would speakers of this language encounter communication problems?

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY SPEAKERS OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN

The problems encountered by speakers of the NP range from the fact that it is educationally disadvantaged, to the fact that it has no standard orthography. NP lacks cultural attachment/affiliation. All these put together affect its social acceptability.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

Officially, the NP has no status in the educational development and life of Nigeria as a nation, since it is not mentioned in the NPE (Ejele 2003: 123). The NPE (1981: 10) states thus;

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the best of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one or the three (3) major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three (3) major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

The authors of this document, which strips NP of the educational importance, did not take into cognizance the importance of NP as a lingua franca. According to Gani-Ikilama (1990:219),

a philosophy of education, which places importance not only on the development of man, but also on man in relation to society, cannot afford to ignore the importance of a lingua franca like Pidgin.

According to Gani-Ikilama above, NP can effectively be used in schools, especially to solve linguistic problems and problems of socialization to school life in the initial years of primary education, provided teachers are well prepared for this in their training programme. Could we possibly interpret the same NPE 1981:17, which states that

The medium of instruction in the pre-primary school is initially the mother tongue or language of the immediate community, and at a later stage English

to serve as a stepping stone to legalize use of NP as a language of instruction in pre-primary school, even if orally, as a medium of instruction, “if education is to be meaningful to our Pidgin-speaking children “ (Gani-Ikilama 1990:219). If we do this, we are only substantiating the fact that the has become the mother tongue of most children in towns like Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Police and Military barracks in Nigerian cities. Ndimele (2003:357) observes that in Rivers and Bayelsa states, teachers resort to the use of NP for explanatory purposes especially in the early stages of primary education, since there is no other common language among the pupils. At other levels of education, we are reluctant to recommend the use of NP as a medium of instruction because of the

fear that this will affect the correct learning of the Standard English. The 1953 UNESCO report share this reservation when it states that “it is feared that the use of the Pidgin in schools will make it harder for pupils to learn the European language correctly”. Problems of interference abound for speakers of Pidgin who learn English as a second language. This interference will no doubt affect the proficiency of such speakers in English. Even if we go ahead to advocate for the use of NP for education at higher levels, we note here that because of the fact that NP is yet to acquire a standard variety and an approved orthography, it cannot be successfully used in education because it is always difficult to teach and even learn in a language that has not been effectively committed to writing. The question now is, has NP reached what Emenanjo (1990:89) calls “appreciable level of sociolinguistic readiness for literacy, involving the processes of (a) Graphization (b) Codification (c) Standardization (d) Modernization (e) Materials production”? (Essien 1990:160), equally recommends five basic steps in the development of a language before the stage modernization as

- (i) The provision of standard orthography
- (ii) The provision of primers for the primary school system
- (iii) The compilation of a dictionary
- (iv) The writing of a pedagogic grammar

- (v) The production of general literary materials and creation of literary tradition.

LACK OF A STANDARD ORTHOGRAPHY

According to Emenanjo (2010:1), a standard orthography will involve a comprehensive writing system that is 'generally' recognized and acceptable. If NP should have a standard orthography, it will therefore be one, which has a stamp of authority and universality of use going with it. Elugbe and Omamor (1991:133) admit that, "the task of writing NP is more formidable than would be expected for other Nigeria languages". They listed the problems of committing NP to writing to include

- Inconsistency in the way of writing NP
- Disagreement by experts on the best way of writing it

Their work goes ahead to recommend three "broad options" for writing NP, with its merits and demerits. These include

- The anglicized writing method which reflects the Englishness of individual vocabulary items by simply reducing them in their English spelling
- Use of a purely phonetic alphabet (only trained linguists can benefit from this)
- Attempt a new modern orthography for NP.

Because of the enormous task involved in the development of a standard orthography for pidgins, many linguists in their discussions of Pidgins and Creoles favour their use as an oral medium. Todd (1974:84) believes that while some use of the Pidgin or Creole as an oral medium is useful, their use in a written medium must be rejected because :

- (1) Preparing materials in Pidgin might involve great financial commitments;
- (2) The users of the material might suffer some unspecified psychological damages;
- (3) Deciding on the orthography would be difficult since to base it on the standard English orthography is to give the false impression that it is an inferior, dialectal variant of English and to use a tailor-made (ie modern) orthography is to teach a set of spelling conventions which will inevitably clash with those of standard English.

The above assertions look discouraging because one major way of securing official recognition for any language is to develop literature in it. We should not rule out the possibility of engaging NP in corpus planning just like any other Nigerian indigenous developing language. Holm (2000:4) notes that because

Pidgins were not traditionally written, their speakers have had to learn literacy in a foreign or quasi-foreign language this has caused educational problems for the millions who speak Creoles in the Caribbean area, and for millions who speak post-creoles and semi-creoles in such countries as the US , Brazil and Australia.

Invariably, it is obvious that speakers of Pidgins in general, and NP in particular suffer a disadvantage because the language they use has not been successfully committed to writing and does not attract a befitting sociolinguistics status within the Nigerian polity.

LACK OF CULTURAL ATTACHMENT

Struggles for development of languages are in most cases championed by socio-cultural groups. This most of the time is because of the relationship between language and culture and language and ethnicity. Ethno- linguistic groups most often emphasize their mother tongue as core values. According to Ndimele (2208:15), an ethnic group or even politicians can fight for ethnic and/or political equality by first preserving and developing their languages as veritable tool for preserving and sustaining their ethnic and political identity. This close relationship between language and ethnicity led Essien (1990:161) to advocate for a “language policy which will integrate fully all nationalities and linguistic groups, in order to allay the fear of ethnic and cultural domination”. When a group is afraid that its language is to be linguistically imperialized, it resorts to ethnic sentiments. In 1982 for instance the Ibibio Cultural Organization commissioned the writing of the Ibibio orthography and presented it to the State Ministry of Education as part of

its community contribution to education. (Essien 1990:167). The Igbo speaking group which battled for orthography legitimacy for over thirty years, (1927 - 1961) ,had the Society For Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) at the forefront of the reform. (Ndimele 2010:124). When these socio-cultural groups fight for the survival or development of their languages, they do it with commitment because the relationship between language, culture and ethnicity are important aspects in multilingual cities where status of languages vary and serve as visible index of a people's identity. When speakers of a language are not directly involved in the struggle/campaign for its development, the result of such a struggle is usually not rewarding. The Rivers Readers Project (RRP) which came into being after the creation of Rivers state in 1967, aggressively pursued the development of indigenous languages of Rivers state. The government sponsored the project and Readers and supporting materials were produced, but the lack of cultural commitment exhibited by the numerous linguistic groups stalled the continued progress of the laudable project. As Ndimele (2003:363) predicted, the development of the affected languages terminated at the stage where the RRP was able to carry them.

There is ample evidence that NP is now a Creole, having acquired native speakership in most of the Niger Delta area (Warri, Sapele Port Harcourt, Benin).

When a pidgin develops beyond its role as a trade language and becomes the first language of a social community, it is described as a Creole. (Yule 1996:234, Akmajian et al 2001:298, Okeke 2006:29, Ndimele 2008:73). Elugbe and Omamor (1991:47) listed the evidence as highlighted by some linguists, that NP has met the formal criteria for creolization as follows:-

- i. There is at least one generation of people for whom NP is a first language.
- ii. NP as of today clearly has an associated linguistic community.
- iii. The language displays evidence of the kind of rapid changes associated with the acquisition of native speakers by a pidgin, and
- iv. Its range of usage seems to be more extensive than that of any other local languages with which it may be said to be in competition.

Although still called pidgin, NP has acquired an associated speech community in the Niger Delta region. If this is the case, why has no socio-cultural group in this region taken up the challenge to ensure that NP serves an official purpose beyond its oral use? The advantage of neutrality (in ownership) of NP has become a major disadvantage. (Ndimele 2003:256) notes that NP is the most favourable language in Port Harcourt city because it is seen as a self imposed language that cuts across ethnic, cultural, political and psychological barriers. The speakers have no fears of being marginalized because the language belongs to no ethnic group. Simply put, the situation can be summed up this way; NP has acquired native

speakership/associated speech community in the areas mentioned above, but none of these linguistic groups can claim ownership of NP because it actually belongs to no group of the speakers. What then is the cultural heritage of the Nigerian child who speaks NP as a first language? If language is the main means of cultural transmission and identification, the fate of the Nigerian child who speaks NP as a first language is hanging. What we have observed are efforts geared towards the development of the various indigenous languages of the Niger Delta region: Isekiri through Centre for the study of Isekiri language and culture (Emenanjo 2010:6), Urhobo, through the Urhobo language committee (Aziza 2010:109), Izon, Kalabari, and others, through the Rivers Readers Project. Whose responsibility is it then to lead the agitation for the development and standardization of NP? Onoyovwi (2010:68) justifies the efforts geared towards the development of the indigenous languages by referring to the 1988 Cultural Policy for Nigeria which states in section 5.15 that

The state shall promote the mother tongue as the basis of cultural Education and shall ensure the development of the Nigerian languages as Vehicles of expressing modern ideas and thought processes.

Also Mowarin (2010:230) in justifying the revitalization of Uvwie language of Delta State, which he accepts to be a small language under the Urhobo cluster, cited the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996:10) thus

Language is the key to the heart of a people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe, a lost tribe is a lost culture, a lost culture is a lost civilization. A lost civilization is invaluable knowledge lost. --
-the whole vast archives of knowledge and experience in it will be consigned to oblivion.

The dilemma of NP is what an Igbo speaker will proverbially describe as ‘the goat owned by many but which is ultimately starved to death’

SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN

People have complex attitudes towards the use of pidgins generally. Many see pidgins as ‘debased’, or ‘corrupt’ version of standard languages. The Encyclopedia Britannica for instance defines the pidgin as ‘unruly bastard jargon filled with nursery imbecilities, vulgarism and corruption”. According to Igboanusi (2001:362), ‘ the problem with Nigerian Pidgin lies in its image as ‘bad’ form of English’. Elugbe & Omamor (1991:142) note that the educated Nigerian tries to “shield his children from NP - - - suggesting an educated Nigerian’s belief that NP is inferior Standard English’. Even though linguists recommend the adoption of NP

as Nigeria's official lingua franca, they are quick to state that the lack of status of NP stem from the fact that ability to speak it confers no social advantage on the speaker. (Elugbe & Omamor (1991:362)

In a multilingual speech community, speakers choose the language that most satisfy their communication needs. In making this choice, they as well consider which language will accord them respect, and not stigma. According to Igboanusi (2008:252)

in multilingual contexts, language choice at the individual level is more complex and is determined by a lot of factors. The bilingual or multilingual person makes decisive choice between languages or codes, which may be perceived as more appropriate or more effective in performing a particular function at a given situation.

There are so many sociolinguistic variables that influence the choice of language – government and institutional fiat, gender and age, addressee, etc. An adaptation of the domains of language use by Fishman(1972), which Ndimele (2008:5) used in her classification with reference to the Nigerian speech community indicates that NP features in the 'family domain', the 'friendship domain', the 'unofficial business domain', partially in the 'religious domain', but is completely left out of the 'education domain' and the 'official domain'. From the above, it is observed

that NP is restricted to unofficial domains and this affects the numerous Nigerian children who use it as their first language. As Bamgbose (1992:23) notes,

the real problem with Pidgin (NP) is that it has remained largely a spoken language that is seldom used as a written medium. ...The fact that it is also often associated with comic situations as opposed to a range of serious domains is a drawback.

The solution Bamgbose above proffers is for NP to be used in a wider range of domains as is being done in Papua New Guinea where Pidgin is an official language used in parliament.

PROSPECTS

In discussing the prospects of NP, it would be logical to list a plethora of uses of NP in the Nigerian multilingual nation. We note Ejele's (2003:123) observation that the use of Pidgin (NP)

Has come a long way and is playing important roles and functions in the lives of more and more people, as its users continue to spread in spite of its not having an official role or status in the life of the nation

Having assumed the status of Language of Wider Communication (LWC), many linguists and language enthusiasts have argued for its realistic position in the

scheme of things in the Nigerian polity. Many have campaigned for its adoption as an official lingua franca (Gani-Ikilama, 1990, Essien, 1998 among others) Michael (2009:166) proposes that 'NP could solve the national language problem if adopted as a 'unity language' among ethnicities'.

With speakers approximated at between 75-80 million, NP's future of becoming Nigeria's official lingua franca is bright. The numerous problems encountered by speakers of NP are not peculiar to the Nigerian situation. For any language still at the developing state, it takes efforts on the part of speakers and government to sustain the struggle. Though NP is not used officially in education, its oral use is encouraging. Writers have started using NP as vehicle for poems, verses in prose, etc. This shows that NP is gradually establishing a foothold in the written medium. After all most 'catchy' advertisements (oral and written) are done in NP. The government uses NP in mass literacy/mobilization programmes. This same government can encourage the use of NP in State Houses of Assembly, especially in linguistically heterogeneous states. Holm (200:4) observes that " in Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific area, Tok Pisin (an English based pidgin) is now used in the House of Assembly and in news broadcasts because of its nationwide currency" Holm above goes ahead to name other places where Creoles are

acquiring such status, as, Cape Verde Islands, Guinea-Bissau, the Seychelles, Haiti and the Netherlands.

The use of NP by the media in Nigeria is encouraging. Almost all state radio and television stations have one programme or the other in NP. There is also a radio station – WAZOBIA FM, Port Harcourt, and Lagos, dedicated to NP. The print media have played and could still play more roles in the development of NP. The Lagos weekend series ‘wakabout’ was very entertaining because many readers identified with the language (NP). Though Elugbe & Omamor (1991:67) insists that ‘wakabout’ is not written in NP (mostly because of deviations from certain phonetic and phonological rules), the paper attracted wide readership. We could therefore opine that if the media are enthusiastic about helping in the development of NP into a standard and acceptable language, they can achieve that without incurring any financial loss. Such medium will instead benefit economically and popularity wise.

The attitude of most educated Nigerians towards the use of NP could be likened to a chef in a five star hotel who regards the food sold by roadside hawkers as junk, but sends his ‘boys’ with a flask in a concealed bag to buy some food for his consumption. The unique taste of the junk food is irresistible to him, yet he

cannot afford to be seen patronizing or promoting what he condemns. The educated and elite Nigerians use NP for relaxation and with their friends, especially when their children are not listening. Our politicians also resort to NP when they want to identify with the electorate. Therefore, considering the complexity of the Nigerian linguistic situation, and the fact that NP is gaining more nationwide currency in use, the government is expected to intensify efforts in promoting and adopting NP as the nation's official lingua franca.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interaction in any given society depends on communication, and the most obvious vehicle for this is language. The Nigerian linguistic situation would have been more complex and chaotic without the emergence of NP. The fact that some people regard NP as consistently or deliberately bad English does not mean that it is ineffective in carrying out normal functions of a human language. What this derogatory label has succeeded in doing is affecting the attitudes of speakers of this language negatively. Elugbe & Omamor (1991:73) note that NP is "an independent distinct language with a characteristic system that operates on the basis of well defined and discoverable governing principles. The numerous problems encountered by the speakers of NP, especially L1 speakers are issues

that should be addressed by both levels of speakers (L1 &L2) alike. NP is noted to be more widely spoken than any of the three major languages. It is gaining more nationwide currency because as a product of urbanization, and the fact that more rural communities are becoming urbanized due to industrialization and educational advancements, it means that more linguistic groups will join the league of NP speakers. As Okeke (2006:34) observes, pidgin places its users at an advantage over other monolingual vernacular users. True , NP is seen as the language of the illiterate and marginally literate, but the fact remains that it makes for efficient communication network.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are based on implementable and practical issues. Firstly, the Federal Government should accept the fact that no ethno-linguistic group in Nigeria will willingly and singlehandedly pursue the struggle for the development and standardization of NP. It should be the responsibility of the Federal Government to commence action and queue in states and other interest groups as stakeholders. The Federal Government can start off with and intensive awareness programme, using the federal media to propagate and promote the cause.

Religious and socio-cultural groups are known to promote and sustain struggles for language development. These groups should be encouraged to start utilizing the written medium, irrespective of the orthography variations. Important aspects of the cultures of the L1 speakers can be embedded in NP to retain such cultures.

An Advisory Board or Committee should be inaugurated to develop a programme that will evolve in stages for this cause. Membership of such a body should include Linguists and language enthusiasts, educationists, legislators, religious and socio-cultural group leaders', representatives of Youth organizations, writers and publishers, among others. One of the duties of such a body should include the adoption of the most widely used variety of NP. This will in turn inform the orthography best suited for the language.

The government can use the Niger Delta region, where NP is most widely used, as a pilot for this project. If government through a fiat enthrones NP as the official lingua franca in this area, the standardization process and development of an acceptable orthography can be test run, corrections effected, to reflect and form the acceptable form for the national NP

Regular workshops should be organized for linguists and language experts. These workshops will give the experts the opportunity to design an acceptable orthography, be it tailor-made or not, which the government can use as a working tool. The process of language development takes time, efforts and resources, and Nigerian Pidgin is no exception.

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