

## Beyond Barriers: The Changing Status of Nigerian Pidgin

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### Abstract

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It is a sociolinguistic reality that any living language has the tendency to adapt to the environment in which it operates whether the language is spoken as a first or second language. The English language has served the nation Nigeria in much capacity – as the language of education, commerce, politics, administration etc. Nigeria as a multilingual nation with about four hundred or so ethno-linguistic groups each with an indigenous language has the English language superimposed on them as the official language. So English in Nigeria is continuously undergoing various processes of domestication, naturalization and acculturation within each ethno-linguistic context. In a situation where two speech communities without a common language come together for a certain purpose, a means of communication emerges. The emergent language is usually referred to as a contact language. This paper takes a cursory look at the evolution of Nigeria Pidgin over the years.

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**Keywords:** Nigerian Pidgin, Broken English; superstrate language, inter-ethnic communication, indigenous languages, lingua franca

### Introduction

The primary purpose of language is communication. It is used to communicate an incredible number of things. We cannot make sense of an idea without being able to make sense of the language. Wherever people meet; language comes into play. “Whatever else people do when they come together – whether they play, fight, make love, or make automobiles – they talk” (Fromkin et al 2003). Humans communicate with language. Although language is not the only means of communication, it is what we use to exhibit our ideas, thought processes, feelings and opinions. The whole essence of our being is captured in our language, which is the reason a people’s language is greatly affected whenever a country, people or race gets conquered or colonized. Whenever the onus is on us to communicate with people, we rely heavily on our distinctive human skill known as language. In a situation where two speech communities without a common language come together for a certain purpose, a means of communication emerges. The emergent language is an amalgamation of the two languages from the two speech communities; hence, it is called a contact language. It could serve its purpose for the time being or live on for so many years. This paper takes a cursory look at the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin over the years.

### Pidginisation

“Pidginisation is a complex process of sociolinguistics” (Hymes 1974). It involves a superstrate language and substrate languages. The superstrate is usually the language of power while the substrates are usually the local languages. A Pidgin language takes its lexifiers/vocabulary from the superstrate language and the grammar and phonology from the substrate languages. The emergent language is called a Pidgin; it is massively simplified and spelled as it is pronounced. In the case of Nigerian Pidgin, the English language is the superstrate while the indigenous languages are the substrate languages.

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According to Elugbe, Nigerian Pidgin is English-based or English-related because most of its vocabulary is derived from English. Since it has Nigerian languages as its substrate or underlying influence, it can be said, and it is often said, that the vocabulary of Nigerian Pidgin is English while its grammar is English. (qtd in Bamgbose et al, 995) Pidgin languages share certain common features like specific word order and morphological simplification. A Pidgin language is generally reduced “in the direction of whatever features are common to the languages of all those using the Pidgin, for mutual ease in use and comprehensibility, thus arriving at a kind of greatest common denominator” (Hall, 1996). Hudson asserts that “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” (2000). These definitions affirm that Pidgin languages are languages in the true sense of it. No language is inferior to another instead languages are meant to rub off on another where two or more speech communities are in contact. A Pidgin is either restricted or extended/expanded. A restricted Pidgin is a means to an end and dies out after the contact situation that gave rise to it has ended while an extended/expanded Pidgin lives on and could be creolized, decreolised or become an international language.

## Theories on the Origin of Pidgin

### 1.2 Baby-Talk Hypothesis

This theory is of the view that Pidgins are as a result of an imperfect mastery of a language while its initial stage, in the child with its first language and in the grown up with a second language learnt by imperfect methods, leads to a superficial knowledge of the most indispensable word, with total disregard to grammar. The general idea in baby-talk hypothesis is that people lack the ability to learn the standard languages with which the Pidgins are associated. This theory has been rejected by many linguists. Wardhaugh (1998) believes that “there is no evidence either for any ‘foreigner-talk’ or ‘baby-talk’ theory for the origin of Pidgins and Creoles, that is, that they result from Europeans simplifying their languages in order to communicate with others”. He further reiterates that, Pidgins are not a kind of baby-talk used among adults because the simplified forms are the best that such people can manage. Pidgins have their own special rules, and, as we will see, very different Pidgins have a number of similarities that raise important theoretical issues having to do with their origins.

### Monogenetic/Relexification Hypothesis

This theory lays claim to the fact that Pidgins’ underlying structural similarity is traceable to one common European source. It is based on historical evidence that points to the existence of a fifteenth century Portuguese Pidgin which is assumed to have been derived from an auxiliary language called Sabir that was used in the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages.

According to Wardhaugh,

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Portuguese relexified this language; that is, they introduced their own vocabulary into its grammatical structure, so that a Portuguese based Pidgin came into widespread use as a trade language. Later, this Pidgin was in turn relexified into Pidginised French, English and Spanish.

### The Nautical Jargon Theory

This theory posits that sea farers, ocean travelers and navigators developed Pidgin as a matter of necessity. John Reinecke noted the possible influence of nautical Jargons on Pidgins. He is of the belief that the many voyages of discovery embarked on back then led to the development of a core vocabulary of nautical items and a simplified grammar. It asserts that the similarities among Pidgins and Creoles could be attributed to a common origin in the language of sailors.

Elugbe and Omamor 1996 state that,

The argument of the monogenetic/reflexification theory is slightly similar to the one involved in the nautical Jargon hypothesis. Both views assume one origin for all Pidgins and essentially the same method of diffusion.

### The Independent Parallel Development Theory

This theory is based on the well-acknowledged similarities between Pidgins.

The argument is that the similarities which are known to exist between different Pidgins must be explainable in terms of the fact that: they are derived from Indo-European stock, i.e. they all have as one of the input languages some Indo-European language or the other they all involve a good percentage of speakers who share “a common west African sub-stratum, and had to come to terms with similar physical and social conditions” (Elugbe and Omamor 1991). This theory opines that Pidgin evolved independently of any other language and that any similarity found between Pidgin and any language is a mere coincidence. The propounders pointed out that there are many features inherent in Pidgin that can attest to its independent status.

#### Universalist Theory

This theory considers the similarities in Pidgin to be a result of universal tendencies among human beings to create similar languages, that is, a language with a simplified phonology, an SVO syntax, and a lexicon that thrives on polysemy and reduplication. This theory is the most recent view on the origin of pidgins. The universalist theory serves as the theoretical framework on which the paper is subsumed. In the case of Nigerian Pidgin, it is believed that the earliest visitors to Nigeria were the Portuguese. They were trading with the Achan tribes of Ghana but fell out with them when they demanded part of the payment for their slaves in gold. They went in search of slaves and navigated inland; farther into the coast. The first contact they had with a Nigerian group was with the indigenes of the Niger Delta Region. It was believed that a certain trade jargon was spoken between the two groups. The multiplicity of languages in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria made the Portuguese to introduce the English language to them. The co-habitation of the English language and the indigenous languages produced an emergent language called Nigerian Pidgin.

#### 2.1 Morphology of Nigerian Pidgin

Generally, Pidgins are simplified languages. Nigerian Pidgin is an English-based Pidgin, that is, its lexicon is massively based on the English language. Nigerian Pidgin employs many devices in enriching its rich vocabulary.

##### Reduplication

Reduplication is a “mechanism for forming new words. It involves the repetition of a word (or part of a word) resulting in a distinct lexical item slightly different in meaning” (Holms, 2000). It is a morphological process in which the root or stem of a word (or part of it) or even the whole word is repeated exactly or with a slight change.

It is used to create new words in lexical derivation.

##### Examples

Wuru wuruJaga jaga  
Kia kiaKata kata  
Yama yamaWaka waka  
Corner cornerblo blo  
Hori hori

#### 2.2 Affixation

Affixation is the linguistic process used to form different words by adding morphemes (affixes) at the beginning, middle or the end of words. The suffix -y may often be attached to adjectives to derive nouns that bring out contrastive meanings that are emphatic.

##### Examples

short = shortly – A short person  
black = blacky – A very dark skinned individual  
left = lefty – A left handed fellow  
sweet = sweety– A dear one

#### 2.3 Compounding

It is a process of word formation that creates compound lexemes. Compounding takes place when two or more words are joined together to make one word. The meaning of the compound word might be different from the meanings of the various words in isolation.

##### Examples

A+N

longthroat-glutton  
 badbelle-jealousy  
 busybody-prying person  
 sharp mouth-a talkative person  
 stronghead-stubbornness  
 longleg-nepotism  
 badmarket-hard luck  
 long rope-period of grace  
 bigman-a wealthy man

N+N

Godpikin-Christian  
 babygirl-girlfriend  
 countrypeople-masses  
 babyoku-nubile girl  
 basketmouth-a garrulous person  
 coconuthead-a dunce  
 bushmeat-game

V+N

makemouth-boast  
 makeeye-wink  
 hearword-listen/obey  
 tearrace-run  
 tearface-wild person  
 sufferhead-unlucky person  
 fearface-respect

V+V

sidonlook-redundant  
 carrygo-suit one's self

These compound words are either hyphenated, written separately or together.

#### 2.4 Metaphorical Extension

Metaphorical extension is a natural process in any language undergone by every word. It is the extension of meaning in a new direction through popular adoption of an original metaphorical comparison.

Examples:

Water don pass garri-A disturbing situation

Tokunbo-fairly used goods

Pancake-cosmetics

Yellow fever-a traffic warden

Grammar-a fine sounding English word

#### 2.5 Clipping

Clipping is a word formation process that involves the reduction of a word to one of its parts. In Nigerian Pidgin, some of the words got from the superstrate language (English) are shortened but they retain their full lexical meaning.

Examples:

gree-agree

acada-academic

bros-brother

tori-story

Naija-Nigeria  
 Pami-palmwine  
 Sisi-sister

## 2.6 Acronyms

An acronym is formed from the initial components of a word or phrase.

Examples

OK-Okrika  
 TDB-Till Day Break  
 K-A thousand naira  
 24/7-24 hours a day, 7 days a week  
 OYO-On your own  
 JJC-Johnny just come

Assignment of meaning to Referents based on Social, Economic and Political Circumstances

Ghana must go-Luggage  
 Face me I face you-A ghetto compound  
 Park one side-steer clear  
 I pass my neighbor-a small generator set

## 2.7 Borrowing

A word borrowed from one language for use in another.

Examples

boku-French  
 wayo-Hausa  
 awuf-Krio  
 sabi-Portuguese  
 pikin-Portuguese  
 abi-Yoruba  
 shebi-Yoruba

## 3.0 Nigerian pidgin versus Pidgin English (Broken English)

Pidgin English is a sub-standard attempt by illiterates to manipulate the English language. It is grammatically aberrant and defective. According to Elugbe (1991)...Broken English represents the level to which the speaker has acquired English. There are flashes of good English but also real errors which are evidence of poor mastery. Agheyisi (1971) concurs to the above when he posits that “the typical users of NPE are those that have little or no formal education”. Pidgin (broken) English is an aberrant form of the English language while Nigerian Pidgin is a language that emerged as a result of the contact between the English language and the indigenous languages in Nigeria. Nigerian pidgin’s superstrate language is the English language and its lexicon is massively affected by the English language. It is English-based and not a result of an incomplete mastery of the English language. Nigerian Pidgin has a unique linguistic structure and identity and like every other language, it is dynamic and has evolved over time. Broken English is a pejorative label used by native speakers of English to describe the often hysterical violations of the basic rules of Standard English. It is often used by people whom the English language is a foreign language (The Chinese and Japanese) and not by those to whom it is a second language (Nigerians). But the uneducated Nigerian may speak it in a faltering attempt to speak the Standard English. People tend to use Nigerian Pidgin and broken English interchangeably but Nigerian Pidgin is not Pidgin English (broken English). Nigerian Pidgin is not a failed attempt at speaking the standard English but it is English-based. A good example of Broken/Pidgin English is Zebrudaya’s special English in *The New Masquerade*.

Example

PE

How can I division myself into twice?

NP

How I go fit divide myself into two?

How I go take divide myself into two?

Nigerian Pidgin is a creative language with its own rich lexico-semantics and syntax. It is dynamic (same as other languages) and has evolved through contact. Equating Nigerian Pidgin with broken English which thrived many years ago is obsolete and inaccurate. Nigerian Pidgin is a language that has been accepted and recognized by Nigerians at all levels of education and class as an effective means of communication. According to Hudson (2000) A pidgin based on language X is not just an example of 'bad X', as one might describe the unsuccessful attempt of an individual foreigner to learn X. A pidgin is itself a language, with a community of speakers who pass it on from one generation to the next, and consequently with its own history. Indeed, it has even been suggested that many Pidgins have a common origin in the Portuguese-based Pidgin which developed in the far East and West Africa during the sixteenth century, under the influence of Portuguese sailors, and that this Portuguese-based Pidgin might in turn have had its roots in the 'Lingua Franca' developed in the Mediterranean as early as the crusades. Although Nigerian Pidgin is English-based, the substrate languages have contributed immensely to the evolution of the language. In the words of Mafeni, qtd in Spencer (1991)... although it has supplied the vast majority of the items that make up the Nigerian Pidgin lexicon, the various substrates also supply vocabulary items (however few) as well as the more important processes by which the English loan-words are made to acquire new or additional meanings.

The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

Naijiria Pidgin

bi laik pikin

we no get papa

bot evribodi

de sen am mesej

(qtd in Bamgbose et al 1995)

#### 4.0 Language Marginalisation

"The world community is biased against Pidgins and Creoles. They are often thought of as debased, sparse and intellectually inferior languages" (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991). Nigerian Pidgin is being marginalized in Nigeria. It has been described as a debased, aberrant and make-shift language. But its marginalization notwithstanding, Nigerian Pidgin is our lingua franca because it serves a wide range of Nigerians whose divergence includes ethnic, religious, educational and class boundaries. A lingua franca is "a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them" (Wardhaugh, 1998). Lingua Francas are called bridge languages because they foster inter ethnic communication and relationships. The general idea in Nigeria is that the English language is our lingua franca yet it can only be truly acquired through formal education. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, everybody cannot boast of formal education in Nigeria and less than ten percent of the masses possess a complete mastery of the English language. It is the language of the elite and does not cut across all walks of life. How can a language got through formal education be the lingua franca in Nigeria? Can fifty percent of the populace boast of formal education? A lingua franca is meant to be spoken and understood by the majority of the populace. It must have a broad base of speakers. According to Faraclas, 1996 "a conservative estimate of the number of people who speak Nigerian Pidgin as a second language would have to exceed 40 million and the number of first language speakers has already surpassed 1 million". He further reiterates that, Well over half of the 140 million inhabitants of Nigeria are now fluent speakers of the language (NPE) making Nigerian Pidgin the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, as well as the indigenous African language with the largest number of speakers. Given the rapid spread of Nigerian Pidgin (NPE) among younger Nigerians, this proportion should increase to cover over seventy or eighty percent by the time the present generation of children reaches adulthood.

Nigerian Pidgin is one of the languages with vitality despite its unofficial position; the negative connotation associated with it is gradually wearing off as linguists are beginning to explore the creativity associated with the language. The government has realized the effectiveness of Nigerian Pidgin and is using it to disseminate information, especially on health issues, to the public. It has recognized the vital role Nigerian Pidgin plays in getting closer to the masses. Jingles, posters, stickers, etc are now prepared in Nigerian Pidgin because it is the language of wider communication. A lot of TV commercials have been done in Nigerian Pidgin. According to Elugbe, “government agencies are now getting round to the position that, if the object is to reach as many Nigerians as possible, Nigerian Pidgin, is at least, one of the languages to employ” (qtd in Bamgbose et al, 1995).

Examples:

MTN Portability advert

I don port oh!

Indomie noodles

Mama do good o!

Hypo bleach

Hypo go wipe o!

Gala

Carry hold belle

Panadol

Oga for strong strong headache

If e no bi panadol

E no fit be panadol

Raid Insecticide

E no get photocopy

Az Oil

E no get part 2

Bagco Super Bag

E strong kakaraka

Gold Circle

Aids no de show for face, abeg use condom

Jowitt (2000) posits that, “the situation today is that Pidgin flourishes as the language of inter-ethnic communication”.

All the telecommunication companies in Nigeria make use of Nigerian Pidgin in their call centres. Whenever a customer calls in, the customer is asked to choose between English, Nigerian Pidgin and the indigenous languages. Nigerian Pidgin is currently trending in the entertainment industry and the music industry has contributed immensely to the lexicon of Nigerian Pidgin with the advent of words like

Yahooze-A fraud

Kukere-dance

Gobe-trouble

Kolomental-A psychopath

Limpopo-enjoy

Swagger-boldness

Alobam-friend

Eminado-lucky charm

In Lagos State, a radio station called Wazobia FM broadcasts fully in Nigerian Pidgin and it was established in 2007. People from all walks of life call in during their live broadcasts and it is believed that the radio station has the largest number of listeners, thanks to Nigerian Pidgin. Nigerian Pidgin has found its way into the literary sphere in Nigeria. Many years ago, it was used to depict the stupidity and illiteracy of some characters. But recently, authors have been exploring the beauty of the language in poems, prose and fiction. Some of these works include:

Tori for geti bow leg-Mamman Vatsa

If to say I bi soja-Ezenwa Ohaeto

I wan bi President-Ezenwa Ohaeto

Dis Nigeria sef-Ken Saro-Wiwa

No food no country-Tunde Fatunde  
 Grip am-Ola Rotimi  
 Abuja na kpangba an Oda puem dem-Eriatu Oribhabor  
 A man of the People-Chinua Achebe  
 The Voice-Gabriel Okara

“Today, the functions of Nigerian Pidgin have become more extensive. Apart from expanding its territorial spreads as a lingua franca on ethnically heterogenous areas... it is now used in radio and television broadcasts and in poetry and drama” (qtd in Bamgbose et al, 1995). Nigerian Pidgin is undeniably Nigeria’s lingua franca. Elugbe observes that “it is certain that no other language, be it indigenous or foreign, has the number of speakers that Nigerian Pidgin has (it is clearly the most widely spoken language in Nigeria today)” (Bamgbose et al, 1995). Nigerian Pidgin is currently experiencing an ambivalent shift in status because of its diachronic development over the years.

### 5.0 The National Language Question

A national language is a language in widespread and current use throughout a specific country and is a representative of the identity of its speakers. Nigeria is in search of a national language while one stares it in the face. According to Elugbe Another of its assets is that it is a national language... a language may be national by being spoken all over Nigeria, by being indigenous and by being declared ‘national’. Nigerian Pidgin is national because it meets two of the requirements: It is geographically spread all over Nigeria and spoken by Nigerians of different ethnic groups; and it is indigenous to Nigeria because it originated, is sustained and is expanding here in Nigeria. (qtd in Bamgbose et al, 1995) The three major Nigerian languages were adopted as national languages, playing second fiddle to the English language. But Nigeria is a multilingual and multiethnic nation so, the adoption of these three languages is seen as linguistic imposition by other ethnic groups. It is considered an attempt to dominate the remaining ethnic groups that are over 200 in number. It is therefore, pertinent to adopt a home grown language. A language that is both home grown and ethnically detached; Nigerian Pidgin. Nigerian Pidgin is socially, politically and ethnically detached and has greater acceptability. Its sound system, word formation strategies and sentence structure are devoid of complexities that could be encountered in learning any Nigerian language. Nigerian Pidgin is a major linguistic asset and would go a long way in solving the national language problem.

#### 5.1 Creolisation and Decreolisation of Nigerian Pidgin

The usual pattern of development of Pidgins is from Pidgin to Creole and from Creole to a de-creolised form which is almost identical with the superordinate language from which it partly derives and with which it co exists in a diglossic relationship. (Bamgbose et al, 1995)

Pidginisation – Creolisation – decreolisation – post creole continuum

Languages are dynamic in nature and evolve with time. Pidginisation involves at least three languages, where the third language is the dominant or superstrate language. Where there are only two languages, there is a direct struggle for dominance. Pidgins are of two types, the restricted Pidgin and the extended/expanded Pidgin. A restricted Pidgin dies out after the contact situation that gave rise to it has long ended. Pidgin first starts out as restricted and may become extended. When an extended Pidgin is learnt as the first language of a group of people, the Pidgin has been creolized. Hudson asserts that, “a Pidgin which has acquired native speakers is called a CREOLE LANGUAGE, or CREOLE, and the process a Pidgin turns into a Creole is called “creolisation” (2000). Creolisation takes place when the children of the speakers of Pidgin learnt it as their first language and develop it fully. Creoles have expanded structures unlike Pidgins that have simplified structures. In a situation where the superstrate language of a Creole is given a prestigial value, decreolization is imminent. Taking DECREOLISATION first, this is what happens when a Creole is spoken in a country where other people speak the Creole’s lexical source-language (for example, English). Since the latter has so much more prestige than the Creole, Creole speakers tend to shift towards it, producing a range of intermediate varieties. Sociolinguists call the Creole the BASILECT and the prestige language the ACROLECT, with the intermediate varieties lumped together as MESOLECTS. This range of varieties spanning the gap between basilect and acrolect is called a ‘POST-CREOLE CONTINUUM’. (Hudson 2000). Decreolisation happens when a Creole becomes similar to the source language and is subsequently regarded as the dialect of that source language. This is a process of reconvergence or language convergence.



In a situation where the decreolised languages go on to have many dialects/varieties of the source language (acrolect, mesolect, basilect), post-Creole continuum has taken place. No language is inferior to another. One of the concepts of language universal is the dynamic nature of all languages. Nigerian Pidgin has been creolized in the South-South region of Nigeria. With the prestigious value accorded the English language (superstrate language) in Nigeria, decreolisation of Nigerian Creole is very much imminent.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The status of Nigerian Pidgin has evolved over time. It is now utilized and appreciated by many different sectors as the language of effective communication. Nigerian English is now studied as a course at the postgraduate level in Nigerian universities. Its advantages cannot be over emphasized. It is a language that reflects our culture, the folkways and the characteristic psychology of the people who use it. We need to identify with our own and give it the full linguistic and official status it deserves, Nigeria pidgin should be promoted as the national language since it is a neutral code, more so the English language has never been our mother tongue nor the first language of any of the over two hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria.

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