



PIDGINIZATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: A STUDY OF NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES IN RIVERS STATE.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examined pidginization and English language proficiency: a study of Nigerian undergraduates in Rivers State. The population of the study consisted of four hundred and eighty-seven (487) undergraduates from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt. The sample size was forty-nine (49). The data for analysis was elicited through recording of undergraduates' conversations in Nigerian pidgin (NP). The recorded conversation was later transcribed and translated into Standard English. Our aim was to investigate if the frequent use of Nigerian pidgin by undergraduates can have any negative implications on their English proficiency. From this research, we discovered that Nigerian Pidgin has greatly affected the English proficiency of many undergraduates. Our findings revealed that most undergraduates begin a sentence with 'me' instead of 'I' which is a lift from Nigerian pidgin. Again, the expressions of most undergraduates lack the s-marker in the simple present tense and in the case of plurality. It was also observed that most undergraduates replace stress and intonation with tone since Nigerian pidgin is a tonal language. It was therefore recommended that lecturers who teach English to first – year students should discourage them from using Nigerian Pidgin frequently; Nigerian pidgin should be restricted to domains where it will not affect undergraduate's English proficiency.*

KEYWORDS: Pidginization, pidgin, Nigerian pidgin, English proficiency.



INTRODUCTION

Pidginization refers to the process of creating a simplified language, known as a pidgin, which emerges as a means of communication between groups with different linguistic backgrounds. A pidgin on the hand is a reduced language that results from extended contact between groups of people with no language in common; it evolves when they need some means of verbal communication... Todd (1). Studies have shown that there are different types of pidgin spoken in different parts of the world. Chidera Onuoha (18) listed some types of pidgin which are: Spanish pidgin, Eskimo pidgin, Tok Pisin, Bislama pidgin, North African French pidgin, Nigerian pidgin, to mention just a few. For the purpose of clarity, this paper focuses only on Nigerian pidgin.

Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian pidgin according to Balogun (92) 'is a term used to denote an English based pidgin; a marginal language used among Nigerians to facilitate communication needs in certain interaction contexts'. Although, information about the development of Nigerian pidgin (hereafter NP) abounds, no consensus seems to have emerged regarding the first person who spoke Nigerian Pidgin and /or the exact place where it was first spoken in Nigeria.

However, Eyo Mensah (167) claims that 'the first recorded form of NP was documented by the famous Antera Duke, a prominent chief, and trader in old Calabar, who wrote mostly about the activities that transpired between the Efik and White trading partners and supercargoes along the Cross River Basin up to Bakassi in Southern Cameroon'.

The fact remains that NP which started as a language for business transactions has today, taken a new dimension. Therefore, it will not be an exaggeration to say that NP has gained new grounds due to the social, economic and political role it plays in Nigeria. Regarding the frequent use of NP, Jibril (237) remarks thus 'As a consequence of the use of NP in domains hitherto restricted to English, NP now trespasses freely into English syntax to borrow structures which are clearly non – NP'. He adds 'the rise of NP and its increasing use in domains hitherto dominated by English are directly attributable to its increasing recognition as a medium of easy communication with the masses'.

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) has developed into different varieties that are spoken in different parts of Nigeria. Available literature reveals the following varieties: **wafi**– the variety spoken in Warri and Sapele (Marchese and Schnukal cited in Mensah 170), **Ajekunle** - the variety spoken in Lagos axis (Jowitt 13), **Una**–the variety spoken in the Southern part of Cross River State (Mensah 169) and **Special English** – which is a variety spoken in Port Harcourt (Omunga 3), to mention just a few.



The Use of Nigerian Pidgin in Rivers State

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is a common language in Rivers State. Recall that, the university in which this research was carried out is situated in Port Harcourt, the headquarters of Rivers State. Port Harcourt is known to be a multilingual community. Therefore, the predominant language that is used in Port Harcourt is Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Suffice it to say that, NP is heard on the street, in the market, church and even in other places.

Some students may have acquired NP early in life. Information from project master.com reveals that other students may have learnt it from their parents or within the environment which they live. Subsequently, they carry the language to school where it becomes almost difficult for them to learn Standard English. This accounts for why there is rarely any informal gathering of undergraduates on campus, where NP is not used.

It is a phenomenon in sociolinguistics that language can affect society and society can also affect language. Akindele and Adegbite (2 – 3) confirm this claim when they argue that there is a necessary connection between language and society and that language and society are inseparable. This is why the students have to use the language of their immediate environment (which is Nigerian Pidgin) on the campus.

The reality about university campus in Rivers State today is that, most students have restricted Standard English to only formal settings. For instance, the students use NP to communicate with one another in the hostels, they use it while walking on around the campus. They also use it before and after lectures in the classrooms but use Standard English only in formal settings. This development has created a gap in the spoken and written English of students. Put it differently, often times, students unknowingly introduce NP into their speech and writing even in formal settings.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a survey design. The population of the study consisted of four hundred and eighty seven (487) undergraduates from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The sample size was forty nine (49), [10% of the population size] while a simple random sampling technique was used. The instrument for data collection was the recording of undergraduates' conversation in Nigerian pidgin at the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. The recorded conversation in Nigerian Pidgin was first translated into written form; thereafter it was transcribed into its Standard English equivalent.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis is done under the headings below:

Phonological Differences

Phonology simply means the study of sound patterns of a particular language. Only the aspect of phonology that is related to this study is discussed. Here, the phonology of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is examined vis- a- vis that of the English language.



Examples:

Data 1: A wan si di new post

I will like to see the new post

The phonological difference in the data above is noticed at the sentence initial. The NP version starts with / æ / which is vowel number four and a short vowel. The English version, on the other hand starts with / ai/ which is a diphthong. In the word ‘wan’ which is part of the NP version, the voiceless alveolar /t/ is dropped.

Data 2: In deyalwaz, laik me

He/she always likes me.

In data 2, NP start with /i/ which is vowel number two – a short vowel. The English on the other hand starts with consonant /h// which is glottal fricative.

Data 3: Mi a go kip mai bag here

I will keep my bag here.

The phonological difference in data 3 is that while NP begins with consonant /m/ (bilabial nasal); English begins with the vowel /ai/ which is a diphthong. Considering the data above. It is safe to say that NP is ‘pronunciation based’ while English is spelling based. Again, English allows for consonant clusters while NP does not.

The Grammatical Difference between Nigerian Pidgin and English

One of the grammatical difference that exist between NP and English is absence of gender. There is absence of gender in NP but present in English. This is noticed in data 4, 5 and 6 below:

Data: 4: Di lektura no gree us comot from in class

The lecturer did not allow us to leave his/her class.

Data 5: In tok say person wey no do di asainment...

He/she said that anyone who did not do the assignment...

Data 6: In say in dey forpak

He/she said that he/she was at the park.

‘In clas’ in data 4 above does not indicate gender. That is, whether masculine or feminine. Consequently, a reader may find it difficult to identifying the particular gender that is being referred to. The ‘in tok’ in data 5 does not also indicate the particular gender that is being referred to. Again, while ‘in’ is a pronoun in NP, its English counterpart is a preposition. The same thing also plays out in data 6.

Furthermore, the English language uses – but not limited to – derivation and inflection to form its tenses. Hence, it is possible to have an English expression that will be in; simple



present, present progressive, and future perfect. NP on the other hand, relies so much on loan words for its word formation. NP rarely captures most expressions that are in the past and future tenses; rather, it uses intensifiers and auxiliaries to show tenses. Consider the data below:

Data 7: Babi, a don chek the rizot

Babe, I have checked the result.

Data 8: Yu don hearsay di direkto for I.C.T don die?

Have you heard that the director of I.C.T is dead?

Data 9: O boy, in don call mi oo

O boy (my dear), he/she has called me.

Data 10: In say in dey for pak

He/she said that he/she was at the park

The focus of data 7 is ‘a don chek’, ‘don chek’ which are used to indicate past event. Although the NP word ‘don’ is used to indicate past event, it is not clear whether that expression is in the simple past or past perfect tense. The implication of data 7 above is that most undergraduates who constantly use NP will find it almost difficult to make sentences with the simple past and past perfect tenses. Furthermore, data 7 of the NP version is in the active voice. NP does not have passive voice. Since there is no passive voice in NP, undergraduates who use NP consistently may find it difficult to make sentences in the passive voice.

In data 8, attention is drawn to ‘Yu don hear, and ‘don die’. Observe that there is nothing in the above expressions that shows past tense. This is because the words ‘hear’ and ‘die’ in NP do not undergo any derivation to indicate past tense. Rather, the word ‘don’ is used to modify ‘hear’ and ‘die’ respectively. The same thing is noticed in data 9. The item in data 10 has nothing to indicate past tense. Consequently, most undergraduates may want to transfer this type of expression into English. When that happens, the outcome will be ungrammatical expressions.

Morphological Implications

Morphology has to do with word formation. It examines the way structures such as stem, root, prefix, suffix and even morphemes are arranged to convey meaningful expressions. However, we observe that the above listed structures are found in English but not found in Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Recall that one of the characteristics of NP is lack of affixes including plural markers. This can be observed in data 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15. Below:

Data 11: No soketdey work for dis dipatment

No socket is working in this department.

A careful observation of the above data reveals that the NP version lacks the ‘-ing’ inflections whereas the English version contains it. The morphological implication of the above is that it



can affect Standard English usage of undergraduates who use NP frequently. This is because they may encounter difficulty when it comes to making English expressions that have the –ing inflection.

Data 12: a manipulate mai own tokom get rizot

I manipulated the figures to get my answers.

The key word in data 12 is ‘rizot’ in NP, and ‘answers’ in English. The English version has a bound morpheme – s which indicates plurality whereas the NP version does not have. In a situation like this, there is every tendency that NP will affect Standard English usage of undergraduates. This is as a result of the fact that NP rarely use any bound morphemes to indicate plurality.

Data 13: Na pasha wey we do

What we did was an act of partiality.

The word ‘pasha/ partiality’ is the main focus of the item in data 13. ‘pasha’ which is the NP version does not show any sign of derivation. Partiality, which is the English version has ‘-ity’ suffix which is derived from ‘partial’. Again, the ‘-ity’ suffix makes it a noun from the adjective partial. It is obvious NP cannot undergo the derivational processes above hence; its implication on undergraduates’ Standard English usage is enormous.

Data 14: Na politishanwi go blam

It is the politicians we will blame.

The focus of the item in data 14 is on ‘politishan’ (NP) and ‘politician’ (English). ‘Politicians’ which is the English version has a bound morpheme ‘-s’ which indicates plurality. The NP version – ‘politishan’ has nothing that can indicate plurality. Consequently, undergraduates who constantly use NP stand the chance of omitting the ‘-s’ maker when it comes to Standard English usage.

Data 15: e don taywey di simesta don start

It has been quite a while the semester started.

Here, the focus is ‘start’ (NP) and ‘started’ (English). The English version – ‘started’ has the ‘- ed’ inflection which is also a bound morpheme. The –ed inflection is an indication of past tense. The NP ‘start’ on the other hand has nothing to show for bound morpheme or past tense. This, to a large extent can have a morphological implication on Standard English usage of undergraduates. This could be responsible for an expression such as: ‘It is high time we start’ instead of ‘it is high time we started’. Observe that the expression above also reveals the important role that the ‘- ed’ inflection plays when it comes to tense. This supports the claim by some scholars that in Nigerian Pidgin (NP), there is elimination of tenses.

The morphological implication of lack of ‘- ing’ inflection in NP is that it can affect Standard English usage of undergraduates. This is because most undergraduates who use NP frequently may find it difficult to use most English words that have – ‘ing’ inflection. This



happens when there is omission of 'ing' inflection in sentential positions that absolutely require them. For example:

- *'We look forward to hear from you'* instead of *'we look forward to hearing from you'*
- *'She looks forward to see you'* instead of *'She look forward to seeing you'*.

The Interface of Nigerian Pidgin and English

By interface, we mean where Nigerian Pidgin (NP) interferes with English. The interface is discussed under various subheadings below:

Mismatch of pronouns

This has to do with the way pronouns are placed in NP which is different from English. The items in data 16, 17 and 18 are used to support the above claim.

Data 16: mi a no get data

I do not have data.

Data 17: mi a know di end rizot

I knew the answer.

Data 18: mi a go kip mai bag here...

I will keep my bag here...

Our attention is drawn to 'mi' and 'a' in the data above. Observe that there is a misplacement of pronoun 'me' and 'I'. In the first place, 'me' and 'I' cannot co-occur in an English sentence. 'me' is the first-person singular pronoun and it is supposed to function as accusative case (object position). 'I' remains the first person singular pronoun that functions as the nominative case (subject position) of an English sentence.

The point we are trying to make here is that, while Nigerian Pidgin (NP) uses both 'mi' and 'a' at the subject position; English does not. This is another area where NP can affect the English proficiency of undergraduates who frequently use NP. Another place where there is abuse of pronoun is in the use of 'dem' in NP and 'they' in English. This appears in the data below:

Data 19: Dem say in go Akpajo

They said that he/she went to Akpajo.

The word 'dem' is used in NP as the third person plural pronoun. However, it is used sometimes in place of passive sentence since NP rarely shows passive constructions. The question that comes to mind after a look at the sentence in the above data is 'who are the they?', as used in the sentence. This is why to avoid semantic complexity posed by 'dem', the English version of the sentence above could be re-written as follows:

- It was said that he/she went to Akpajo



- I was told that he/she went to Akpajo.

The use of 'dem' in a position where it ought not to be can interfere with the English proficiency of undergraduates who use NP frequently. This could be responsible for expressions such as '*They seize my phone*' instead of 'my phone has been seized'. '*They stole my bag*' instead of 'my bag has been stolen' etc.

Spellings and Pronunciation

The Nigerian Pidgin (NP) orthography captures only the letters that represent the sounds in a word while English orthography captures even the letters that are silent during pronunciation. Again, NP drops one letter of a word when same letter appears double in English.

The data below attest to this claim:

Data 20: mekwiluk for anodaclas a beg

May we look for another class, please?

Data 21: Di onlikouswey fit afect mi na maths

The only course that might affect me is mathematics

Data 22: Dem wan mek di kontriheadquota for death

They want to make this country headquarters for death

In data 20 above, NP replaces the approximant /y/ in English with the voiceless velar plosive /k/. Again, while the word 'class' in English has double letter 's', only one letter 's' is applicable in NP. In data 21, 'Di' is used in place of the English 'the'. Where English uses double letter 'f' in the word 'affect' NP uses single letter 'f'. In data 22, the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ is prominent in the English word 'want' but absent in NP. In cases like these, NP is bound to affect Standard English usage of undergraduates.

The use of 'na' for Question / Emphasis

The Nigerian Pidgin (NP) uses the word 'na' at the end of a direct question to create emphasis. This is observed in the data below:

Data 23: waiyu no komclasna?

Why did you not come to class?

Data 24: wea in kom go na?

Where did he/she go to?

In expressions like the above, it is possible that NP can affect Standard English usage of undergraduates if the word 'na' is transferred from NP to English.

Following the analysis of the data obtained for this study, this paper therefore reveals that Nigerian Pidgin (NP) has greatly affected the English proficiency of many undergraduates. Our data showed that many undergraduates begin a sentence with 'me'



instead of 'I' which is a lift from Nigerian Pidgin(NP). Again, the expressions of most undergraduates lack the s-maker in the simple present tense because NP cannot account for any of the above. Furthermore, it was observed that many undergraduates have replaced stress and intonation with tone since NP is a tonal language.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined pidginization and English language proficiency of undergraduates in Rivers State and found out that most undergraduates in Rivers State use Nigerian pidgin (NP) in their daily conversation. This is attributed to the fact that NP is the language of their immediate environment. Most undergraduates see NP as the easiest language to communicate with since learning it does not require any formality. However, the implication of NP on undergraduates in Rivers State is enormous as it reflects in most of their sentence constructions. Although, most undergraduates are aware of the fact that NP can corrupt their English proficiency, they still go ahead to use it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lecturers who teach English to first-year undergraduates should discourage them from listening to radio stations or television channels that use Nigerian pidgin. They should be encouraged to tune to stations and channels that use Standard English. Nigerian pidgin (NP) should not be used in the educational sector, rather it should be restricted to domains where it will not affect the performance of students in Standard English. Undergraduates should strive to use Standard English since most of their academic writing and speech will be done in Standard English.

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