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Language Attitude and Nigerian Pidgin

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Abstract

Studies in language attitude, a socio-linguistic phenomenon, exhibit language users' disposition towards languages. The disposition could be negative, positive, ambivalent or lackadaisical, depending on social, psychological, historical and political factors associated with the languages. There could also be a shift in users' attitudes towards languages in certain situations. This study investigates the general attitudes of Nigerians from different social strata towards Nigerian Pidgin/Creole (NP). The subjects' attitudes to NP are elicited through library and ethnographic research. The findings of the study reveal that Nigerians have positive, negative and ambivalent attitudes towards NP. However, positive attitude is dominant. The study also reveals that adequate attention has not been given to NP by language policy makers and linguists in Nigeria. The paper, therefore, advocates a language policy that will recognize NP as lingua franca in Nigeria, as well as the development of its linguistic features.

Introduction

Every human community speaks a language or languages. Language is defined in Longman Encyclopedia as “a systematic communication by vocal symbols” (591). Language is a trait which most decisively distinguishes human beings from all other creatures on earth (Trask 1). Other creatures have languages but

their languages constitute static noises which are not as systematic and organized as human languages.

Fischer explains that language signals where we come from, what we espouse, to whom we belong, it invests our individual, gender or ethnic franchise, it authorizes our pilgrimage through societies, it signals to others what we want and how we intend to achieve it(172). Multiple levels of social interaction from international relations to intimate relationship, are born, enabled and empowered by language.

Languages spoken in human societies could grow, thrive, mutate, decline or go into extinction. These changes basically depend on the attitudes of speech communities towards the language in question. Fischer argues that “while all languages mutate, strong societies’ languages thrive and weak societies’ languages perish, that is, they are replaced by a foreign tongue” (112). Suffice it to say that a society that loses its language has invariably lost its cultural and ethnic identity. Among the phenomenon identified above, the central thing that could make a language thrive or go into extinction is the attitude of the speech community towards it.

Attitude is one’s behaviour or disposition towards a person or an issue. Myer defines attitude as “a favourable or unfavourable evaluative reaction toward something or someone (often rooted in one’s beliefs, and exhibited in one’s feelings and intended behaviours)” (120). This implies that attitude could either be negative or positive. Sometimes, one could also exhibit ambivalent or lackadaisical attitudes towards an issue or phenomenon.

Societal demands on a language could contribute a great deal to the formation of an attitude towards the language. In Nigeria for instance, Latin was taught as a core subject in Nigerian Catholic schools from the early period of the country’s colonization to the late seventies. But from the early eighties till date, the teaching of Latin has been removed from the curricular of such institutions. Consequently, the younger generations of Catholic faithfuls neither understand nor speak Latin. They have gradually developed lackadaisical attitude towards the language. This has invariably affected its usage in the Catholic churches, the only fora where Latin is used in Nigeria. The younger generations can hardly participate actively when mass is being celebrated fully in Latin and the priests rarely do that.

Crystal sees language attitudes as the actual feelings of people about their own language or the language of others. He argues that one’s language attitude is one’s psychological construction regarding one’s own language or the language of others. The attitude could either be positive or negative (3).

Nigeria as a multilingual nation is made up of different speech communities and diverse ethnic groups. Past studies on linguistic situation in Nigeria have brought to the fore the complexity of the native languages in the country. Bamgbose and Okike cited in Ndiemele (2) put the figures of Nigerian indigenous languages to three hundred and seventy-four (374) and four hundred (400) languages respectively. Adegbija claims that there are over five hundred (500) languages spoken in Nigeria (75). The glaring fact, therefore, is that Nigeria is a community made up of different 'tongues', and this, to a great extent, necessitated the adoption of the English language, a colonial legacy, as both the official and second language of the country. Predominant among these languages are Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa and Nigerian Pidgin/Creole. Apart from the first three major languages, Pidgin/Creole is very popular in Nigeria. Ndiemele estimates that Nigerian Pidgin now serves as a native language to approximately three to five million people in Nigeria and it is a second language (L2) for another 75 million people (4). Jowit confirms the popularity of Nigerian Pidgin thus: "The situation today is that pidgin flourishes as a medium of inter-ethnic communication, especially in the large cities with many non-indigenous residents (Bendel, Benin, Port Harcourt etc) or throughout states with small many ethnic groups..." (13).

Therefore, in respect of the roles played by Pidgin/Creole in Nigeria, what general attitudes do different categories of Nigerians have about Pidgin/Creole? Is the language accorded a pride of place in the country? In what ways do sociolinguistic factors inhibit or promote the use of Nigerian Pidgin/Creole? Answers to the above questions are the thrust of this study.

Pidgin: Socio-Linguistic Realities

Pidgin is a contact language, and like all contact languages comes into being under conditions of interaction among people of different linguistic backgrounds. Pidgins usually evolve from the fusion of foreign languages and indigenous languages. Crystal explained that most of the present day pidgins grew up along the trade routes of the world especially in those parts where the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch built up their empires (13). Consequently, we talk of Pidgin English, Pidgin French and so on, depending on which language the Pidgin is derived from. He stated that about sixty million people speak or understand Pidgin worldwide. Akmajian and others add that a Pidgin typically arises in colonial situations though it primarily starts as a trade language (585).

At the outset of pidgin, it has few words and few simple constructions. Interestingly, the syntax of pidgin can be quite unlike the languages from which terms were borrowed and modified. Yule listed the following as the common linguistic features of English based pidgins:

- i. absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a limited vocabulary;
- ii. inflectional suffixes such as –s (plural) and –s(possessive) on nouns in standard English are rare in pidgins, for example, ‘a lot of cars’ is translated as ‘plenti plenti car’. ‘Adaeze’s house is very beautiful’ becomes ‘Adaeze house fine no bi small;
- iii. functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of ‘you’ to ‘your’ as in the English phrase, ‘your book’, English-based pidgin use a form like ‘belong’ and change the word order to produce phrase like ‘book bilong you’ (234). Again, Pidgin language usually uses reduplication as intensifiers or modifying adverbs. For instance, in Standard English (SE). ‘The soup is very palatable’ is translated in Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as. ‘The supu swit well well’ (reduplication).

Pidgin has limited vocabulary. The ‘word’ ‘well’ could stand for ‘fine’, ‘well’, ‘sick’, good. The following examples illustrate this assertion.

I am well. (SE)	I dey well. (NP)
She is sick. (SE)	She no de well. (NP)
She did it satisfactorily (SE).	She do am well well. (NP)
I am fine (SE)	I dee very well” or
	I dee well or fine. (NP)

A Pidgin language could thrive or go into extinction depending on the suitability of the environment it finds itself. Since it is a contact language built specifically for trading, it could go into extinction if the users do not continue with the trade. On the other hand, if Pidgin finds a favourable environment such as a multi-lingual community, its linguistic features expand in order to satisfy the communicative needs of different ethnic groups who find it difficult to relate with their neighbour who neither speak nor understand each others language.

Linguists like Akmajian and others (299), Elugbe and Omamor (61) observe that pidgin usually thrive in multi-lingual parts of the world. Such communities are made up of different ethnic groups with different language that are not understood by other groups. The heterogeneous nature of the communities becomes a fertile ground for Pidgin to evolve and expand. Here Pidgin is found to be so useful that the peoples in contact find they cannot do without it. The Pidgin becomes a common language or lingua Franca. Crystal observed that this happened to Sabir, a pidginized form of French used along the Mediterenian coast from the Middle Ages until the twentieth century. It has happened in Nigeria and above all, it has happened in Papua New

Guinea, where Tok Pisin is known or used by over a million people more than any other language in the country (116). In the aforementioned countries, Pidgin had creolized.

When a pidgin language becomes a variety which is learnt as a first language or mother tongue, it becomes a creole or it is said to have creolized. In such a situation, the language expands to fulfill the roles of a native language. Its vocabulary increases greatly, it develops its own rules of grammatical construction and it is used for day-to-day activities. It is now used to express more complex ideas; it is no longer linguistically restricted like ordinary Pidgin. Mesthrie explains that 'from a synchronic point of view, creoles are normal languages with all the formal properties of natural language (264). In this situation, creoles respond to creative adaptations which are normal in all human languages. A Creole is therefore, a language on its own right. Crystal argues that English based Creole is a major variety of modern English with its own linguistic complexities and not a substandard or inferior version of the English language. Creole gives its speakers their linguistic identity as an ethnic group (116).

Nigerian Pidgin or Creole is generally referred to as Nigerian Pidgin (NP) both in areas where pidgin has creolized or where it still remains a language with few linguistic features.

Nigerian Pidgin/Creole: An Overview

The origin of Nigerian Pidgin can be traced to the contract which was established between multi-lingual coastal communities and Portuguese merchants who were joined later by the Dutch and the English (Elugbe and Omamor 285). Initially, the Portuguese Pidgin was developed but it was gradually replaced by English based Pidgin. The English based Pidgin is what is spoken in Nigeria today. Jowit affirms the above assertion thus:

Nigerian pidgin undoubtedly originated and developed its standard forms during the period of 300 years that elapsed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its vocabulary is drawn from English, with Portuguese probably the source of such common words as dash, palaver, Sabby (or sabe) (13).

Ndimele estimated that Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is a native language to approximately 3-5million people in Nigeria. It is a second language (L₂) for another 75million (4).

Nigerian Pidgin is most widely spoken in the oil rich Niger-Delta where most of its population speak it as their first language. Pidgin has developed to Creole in this area. Ethnic groups in Nigeria can converse in pidgin language, though they usually have their own additional words or local flavour.

All Pidgin languages are made up of substrate and superstrate languages. The superstrate language is the more or most dominant language while substrate language is the less dominant language in the fusion of languages that evolve to a Pidgin or Creole. In the case of NP/Creole, English is the superstrate language while the Nigerian native languages form the substrate language. NP structure derives its vocabulary from English, and much of its sound system from the grammar and syntax of the indigenous Nigerian languages. “The linguistic diversity of the substrate situation ensures that there will be different dialects of NP even if they are mutually intelligible” (Elugbe & Omamor, 48). Major varieties of the NP are however spoken in “ethnically heterogeneous areas such as Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja and other large cities where it serves as a lingua franca” (Igboanusi 361).

Nigerian Pidgin/Creole bridges communication gap and facilitates communication in sociolinguistic situations where there exists no other mutually acceptable language of communication. Nigerian pidgin is spoken more widely than the Standard English. Though the Standard English language is the official language and language of education in Nigeria, it belongs strictly to the elites. It is inaccessible to illiterate members of the society. But an appreciable number of uneducated Nigerians can speak or at least understand NP/Creole.

Nigerian Pidgin/Creole is different from Broken or debased English. Broken English is a derogatory label used by native speakers of English to describe the often hysterical violations of the basic rules of Standard English syntax by non-native speakers of the language (en.wikipedia). A Broken English is not made up of substrate and superstrate parts. It is the English language that is spoken wrongly because of faulty application of grammatical rules or inadequate exposure to the intricacies of the grammar of the English language. For instance, the English sentence “I will see you tomorrow could be translated to Broken English as “Me is come see you tomorrow” while the Nigerian Pidgin version of it is “I go see una tomorrow.” The uneducated or barely educated people in Nigeria speak Broken English.

Nigerian Pidgin is widely used in Nigeria. It is used as the first language, second language and lingua franca. It is virtually used in all spheres of life. It is used in the media, business circles, social life, informal conversations, church programmes, advertisements, literary works, music and political rallies. It is used by literate, semi-literate and illiterate members of the society. The language expands on daily basis.

In spite of this wide converge, NP is mostly used in informal settings and non-governmental transactions. It is not recognized in any of the language policies made in Nigeria. Hence, official documents are not recorded in the language. It has not acquired a stable orthography, sound system and syntax. The language is yet to be standardized. Consequently, Nigerian Pidgin elicits different attitudes from its users.

The Concept of Language Attitude

Attitudes are general and enduring positive or negative feelings about some object or issue. Attitudes manifest in people's behaviours and utterances. Apart from attitudes being negative or positive, people could also develop indifferent, dismissive, lackadaisical or ambivalent attitudes towards a phenomenon. Any of these attitudes could be adopted by a speech community towards a language or languages spoken in their environment.

Lambert (247) cited in Obiegbu (2) explains that the behaviourists and Mentalists approaches are two popular approaches used by theorists in analyzing the concept, attitude. The Mentalists view in one hand is the most represented one and has three components, the 'cognitive' (individual belief system, knowledge and perceptions) 'affective' (emotional reactions and feelings) 'conative' (behavioural intentions and interest). This approach is covert in nature and could not easily be noticed. The Behaviourists on the other hand, argue that attitudes are to be found simply in the responses people make to social situation which implies overt behaviour. This kind of behaviour is much easier to observe and analyze. Both Behaviourists and Mentalists approaches contribute to total formation of attitude towards issues. It starts as a covert perception and later manifests itself overtly in an individual's behaviour or reaction. The formation of an attitude towards a language adopts the aforementioned approaches.

Certain factors contribute to the type of attitude formed by an individual or a group of individuals that use a particular language. These could be the historical background of the language, its role in the society, the population of the people that speak the language and people's general perception of the language. The aforementioned factors could have stabilizing and destabilizing influences on the language(s) in question. Obiegbu is of the opinion that some people show negative attitude to the use of a language mainly because they want to show identity, protect their culture or because of their incompetence in its learning. On the other hand, some show positive attitude to the use of a language may be as a result of penalty involved or the instrumental forces attached. For example, good performance in English in the Nigeria educational sector is an instrumental force for promotion to the next class (4).

Language attitudes usually arise when there are competing languages spoken in an environment. In such a situation the users of the languages might develop different/conflicting attitudes towards the languages. But when there is one homogenous language in a speech community, there will be no need for any kind of conflicting language attitudes. The attitude to the language will definitely be positive.

Language Attitude and Nigerian Pidgin/Creole

The origin of Nigerian Pidgin as well as the vital roles NP plays in Nigeria, determines the attitudes adopted by Nigerian speech community towards the language. As hinted earlier, both Nigerian Pidgin and Creole are generally referred to as Nigerian pidgin (NP).

In the past two decades, Elugbe and Omamor critically examined the roles played by Nigerian Pidgin. They examined the attitudes of laymen, educated Nigerians, Government and linguists towards the language. They argued that in spite of the fact that NP was confronted with a lot of challenges such as Nigerian Government inability to recognize and give it its proper place as a language of wider communication; the dismissive or spiteful attitude of some educate members of Nigerian society towards the NP; low status accorded to the language as the language of the illiterate member of the society; its non-recognition in the education and political life of the country; its undeveloped syntax and orthography; its rejection as an aftermath of colonization, there is still a strong hope that the language will survive, grow and gain its proper place in the scheme of things in the country (148). Hence, they make the following prophetic assertion.

...despite the enormous challenges faced by Pidgin, its viability as a means of communication is undeniably. Besides, NP is neutral and so evokes no tribal sentiment; it is also spreading and expanding. We believe that it will, by its sheer presence, demand and force recognition from all (150).

So, how far has the above dream been realized in our present-day Nigeria? What attitude do the various sectors of Nigerians have about NP? We will delve into these by examining the attitudes of the following sectors of the society: Educated Nigerians which comprise students of higher institutions, Public/Civil Servants, Lay People (market people, commercial drivers and motorcyclists, artisans etc) the Media, Literary Artists, Musicians, Government Education Policy Makers and Religious Institutions.

Attitudes of Educated Nigerians to NP

Undergraduates of various higher institutions in Nigeria hold the healthiest attitude towards NP. It is now fashionable for them to communicate with their peers in NP. They equally use it in social network. This, of course, is mixed with special jargons which are popular among the youths. Most of them speak Standard English in their formal academic pursuit. An appreciable number of the students prefer Pidgin to English in informal discourse. They claim that NP is easier to speak than English. They are not mindful of the grammaticality and acceptability of their Pidgin utterances as they do in English. Omenazu's findings reveal that students accept and

advocate NP as the National language of Nigerian (32). Public/Civil servants speak NP in informal settings. In such occasions, they usually code switch to Standard English or their native languages.

However, public/civil servants stick to Standard English (SE) when they carry out official transactions. NP or native languages are occasionally spoken when the persons they are discussing with neither understands nor speaks English. Moreover, official records are strictly kept in Standard English, the official language of Nigeria. This is in line with Nigerian Constitution which stipulates that the English language is the official language of the country. Though the three major Nigerian languages -Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are recommended as languages that might also be used in the legislative they are rarely used NP has no place in the stipulation (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979, Paragraphs 51 and 91).

None recognition of NP as one of the official languages of Nigeria arouses both positive and negative attitudes from educated Nigerians. They love to speak pidgin informally but avoid using it in official transactions. They also discourage their children from speaking NP. Their basic reason is that NP corrupts the Standard English (SE) acquired by their children.

Attitudes of Literary and Musical Artistes to NP

A good number of young Nigerian musicians use pidgin in their songs. These are musicians like Omawumi, Terry-G, D.Banj, Oritse-Femi, Davido, Aje-Butter, Iyanya, Wiz-kid, Young Gix, Mochedda Effa to mention but a few.

Notable literary artists such as Ezenwa-Ohaeto (poetry), Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Ken Saro Wiwa (Drama and Prose) to mention but a few spiced up their works with Pidgin. Some of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's poems such as *I wan Bi president* and *If to say I Bi Soja* (both published in 1988) are cast completely in NP. Though the other literary works are written in Standard English, some characters are made to speak Pidgin. This helps to make the works realistic. They tell a lot about the geographical settings of such works. Nigerian artistes indeed have positive attitude towards NP.

Attitudes of Lay People and Religious Institutions

Lay people generally have positive or ambivalent attitude towards NP. In heterogeneous communities such as Warri, Port-Harcourt, Calabar, Ajegunle (Lagos) people speak more of NP than any other language. Pidgin is mainly used in markets and social gatherings. Some religious institutions preach and carry out their services in Pidgin. People who live in the aforementioned areas have acquired a degree of proficiency in NP/Creole.

However, in homogeneous communities such as Enugu, Onitsha, Aba and most of the towns in the Northern part of Nigeria, the natives prefer their local language to NP. They only resort to NP when their interlocutors do not understand the native language(s) in these areas. They would rather speak Standard or Broken English than Pidgin. NP is regarded as an inferior language. Mostly the youths in these areas speak Pidgin freely among themselves.

Attitudes of the Media to NP

The Nigerian media especially the radio stations exhibit positive attitude towards NP. This is particularly noticeable in the areas where pidgin has creolized. The following are some of the Nigerian television and radio stations that carry out some of their programmes in Pidgin.

	RADIO/TV STATIONS	TOWN	PROGRAMME OF THE STATIONS
I	Wazobia FM (95.1)	Lagos	All programmes are broadcast in Pidgin. No other language is used in this station.
Ii	BBC Media Station (Nigeria story story Radio)	Abuja	News, jokes, Political, situational and social commentaries.
Iii	Radio Faaji	Lagos	News, Political issues, jokes and social commentaries.
Iv	Metro Fm	Lagos	News, jokes and political issues.
V	Purity Fm	Awka	Jokes and Public interactive programmes.
Vi	Lagos State Television Station	Lagos	News, Sports and social commentaries.
vii	Dream Fm (92.5)	Enugu	Situational, social commentaries and jokes.
viii	Independent Television station	Benin	Jokes, political, situational and social issues.
Ix	Delta Broadcasting Service (DBS)	Asaba	News, sport commentaries, political and social issues.
	Radio Sapiensia	Onitsha	Jokes, social and political issues.
X	Brila Radio Station (Sport Station)	Enugu	Uses pidgin in sports commentaries.
Xi	River State Television Broadcasting Station.	Port-Harcourt	News, sport commentaries and social issues.
xii	Unizik Fm	Awka	Jokes and interactive Programmes

It is also interesting to note that virtually all the radio stations in the country have at least two or three programmes in Pidgin. A lot of advertisements are also made in Pidgin. In some interactive programmes, (phone-in programmes) the audience are

allowed to select a language of their choice. Many of them prefer NP to other languages spoken in Nigeria. Some Nigeria newspapers equally have columns mapped out for NP.

Attitudes of Nigerian Government and Education Policy Makers

Until recently, Nigerian Government has complete negative attitude towards NP. NP is totally ignored in the National Language Policy, its potentials as a lingua franca notwithstanding. The English Language is used as both the second and official language of the country.

NP has no place in the National Policy on Education. Sections four and five of the policy stipulate that the first three years of a child's education should be carried out in the language spoken in the child's immediate environment. The English language should be used from the fourth year of the child's primary education. The child, for the interest of national unity, should also be encouraged to learn one of the major languages spoken in Nigeria (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba). In areas where NP has creolized and hence serves as the first language or language of immediate environment, Pidgin is rarely used in the early years of children's education.

It is however worthy to note that NP has started to receive a reasonable attention from Government and linguist. Hence, it is studied as a course in some of the Universities of Nigeria. A lot of research work is regularly carried out in Pidgin. Linguists like Jowit (12) and Elugbe and Omamor, (61) strongly believe that NP is not a debased or inferior language but a language of its own capable of coping with any idea, just like any other language spoken in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above findings are clear indications that Nigerian Pidgin is gaining strong grounds in Nigeria socio-linguistic environment. Though people have conflicting attitude towards NP but the attitude is more positive than negative.

Considering the large population of Nigerians that speak NP either as first or second language, the Government should accept the reality of NP and make effort to develop it as another important language that binds Nigeria together alongside the English language.

Recommendations

1. Nigeria Government should improve on its language policy and accommodate NP as Nigerians lingua franca and a second official language of the country.

2. The NP has no stable orthography or syntax. There are different variants of the language. Linguists should endeavour to collate these variants and develop a standard form of the language.
3. NP should be taught at all the levels of Nigerian education system and children should not be discouraged from speaking NP.
4. Literary artists, linguists and other Nigerian writers should promote NP by publishing a lot of works in pidgin. Literary artists in particular should make conscious effort not to put NP only in the mouths of illiterate characters. They should create literate characters who also speak Pidgin.
5. Nigerians who shun NP as an inferior language should retrace their steps and recognize the language as one of the important languages spoken in Nigeria.
6. Politicians and church leaders should occasionally conduct their rallies and church activities in Pidgin.
7. The media and advertising agencies should not relent in the use of Pidgin for some of their daily activities.

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