



## DIGLOSSIA AND LANGUAGE CONTACT: NIGERIAN PIDGIN & NIGERIAN CREOLE IN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract:

There has been an ongoing revolution in the areas of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) and Nigerian Creole (NC). Researches are pivoting their searchlight on diverse topics ranging from identity and attitude, to grammaticality and acceptability, creative writing etc., all on the NP and NC. To attune to this quest, this article examined the diglossic situation that exist in the NP and NC which explicates the linguistic division of labour inherent when languages are created and recreated as they come in contact. To achieve this, Uriel Weinreich's theoretical postulations of Prestige and Counter-Prestige were used as lens with which to anchor this intellectual reading. The finding revealed that diglossic situations exist in the NC lectal levels as well as the NP against its lexifier. However, it is of the view that this less valued variety status accorded the NP is a function of the social class/identity and not of contextual usage.

**Keywords:** diglossia, language contact, Nigerian Pidgin, Nigerian Creole

### I. Introduction

Language is a social phenomenon thus attracts criticism, which often times either favours the language or debases it just as the critics perceive it. The major function of any language is to make communication possible amongst its users. However, this function tends to be defeated in the case of a heterogeneous community where multilingualism thrives. A speech community with many languages falls into the problem of speakers understanding one another where there is no common language. Finding a way round it, languages in contact or speakers of the languages in contact create a unifying language which is often referred to as a contact language. This contact

language comes into existence through the simplification of the grammar and lexical items of the languages in contact to arrive at a common language intelligible to the users. This situation gave rise to Nigerian Pidgin, referred to as a contact language in Nigeria.

Because of the simplified nature of this contact language, it is often discussed as a debased form of language and thus has a low prestigious status accorded to it in the Nigerian society. It is good to point here at this juncture that this debased form/classification is a result of the earlier confusion of 'Broken English' with Pidgin, not until linguistic researches debunked and separated the two phenomena. As being discussed, even as pidgin and Nigerian pidgin (NP) in this case has indeed been separated from the debased form cadre, researches still discover constant negativity accorded to its status, which Elugbe and Omamor explicated. To clarify our point here, let us feature the above authors' definition of NP which states that *"it is an independent distinct language with a characteristic system that operates on the basis of well- defined and discoverable governing principles"*(1991:73). NP has thus transcended to a recognized well defined language. Despite this elevated status, the speakers/society still perceive it in a negative light as a language of the uneducated, the low class; which parents would not even want to hear their children speak. It is against this background that this paper has come to refer to it (NP) as belonging to the Less Valued (L) variety. The Highly valued (H) and the Less Valued (L) according Holmes (2013) are terms in diglossic situations used as forms of language classification. Schiffman (2015) views a diglossic language or diglossic language situation as a term usually described as comprising two or more varieties that co-exist in a speech community. In this case, we can situate the Nigerian Creole.

Furthermore, in the Post-Creole continuum, one can also identify and classify the three lectal levels as forms of diglossic situations where the Basilect & Mesolect can be seen as belonging to the 'L' variety and the Acrolect as the 'H' variety. This paper thus wishes to re-align the pejorative conception of NP with the globally conception of diglossia, a major problem which it has identified and which needs adequate attention. The discourse on these reasons is explored in the later segments of this work.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

This research:

- explores the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin and Nigerian Creole;
- ascertains the existence of diglossic situation in the Nigerian Creole and Nigerian Pidgin;

- evaluates the appropriateness of the Highly Valued (H) and less valued (L) variety status accorded these languages in the Nigerian linguistic situation.

### 3. Languages: Issues and Problems

Language is a universal and significant attribute of man and his existence in the society. Through it, man communicates his thoughts. It gives meaning to the life of man. Language consists of codes which are mutually intelligible to the speakers of a given speech community. As Wardhaugh (1986) would have it, *“the intrinsic nature of language is that, communication is made possible among individuals who use the same language (code) because they share knowledge of such language”*.

Language is a code by which members of a society communicate. A society can have one or more languages thriving in it. If it has only one, it is linguistically known as a homogeneous community and a heterogeneous speech community when it has individuals who are multilingual i.e. speak many languages. Although one can say that, there is no absolute homogeneous speech community. The communicative function of language is defeated in a heterogeneous speech community, because people speak different languages therein. When this happens, this communicative function is made unrealistic. The need arises for communication and a search for a code (language) for it. As languages (speakers of languages) come in contact, there is bound to be changes, such change could generate what is known as Pidgin or Creole; which are languages borne out of contact and used to fulfill the purpose of communication or later grow to a Mother Tongue. (MT). Furthermore, one of these languages could also generate two varieties to fulfill various functions; known as the ‘H’ or ‘L’ variety, in a diglossic situation. In all these, one can be informed that when languages are in contact, it attracts varieties of change.

### 3. Diglossia and Language Contact: An Overview

It has been noted that a language is non-existent without its speakers. As speakers of different languages interact closely, there is bound to be an influence of one language on the other. Such influence is as a result of language contact. Language contact thus occurs when two or more languages or varieties of languages interact. It can occur at language borders, between adstratum languages, or as a result of migration, with the intrusive language acting either as a superstratum or a substratum. Its most common products are pidgins, creoles, code-switching, and mixed languages. Language contact gives rise to situations such as language shift, strata influence, creation of new

languages, borrowing of vocabulary, diglossic situations, etc. Speakers of these languages in contact tend to assimilate their speech varieties and eliminate very obvious differences in such languages, in doing this they create a 'working' language which linguists categorize as Pidgin.

A Pidgin language is a language with a simplified structure of two languages in contact developed to fulfill the purpose of communication. Linguists have provided various definitions on the concept which points to one fact that Pidgin developed among speakers without a common language for communication purposes, [Holmes (2013) Wardhaugh (1986) and Trask (2007)]. Varieties of pidgins are classified according to their lexifiers. Thus, we have English based Pidgin, French based Pidgin, etc. Pidgins often have a short life especially when they are developed for a restricted function. On the other hand, it can develop into a fully-fledged language or creole. Holmes and Trask posit that a Pidgin language is likely going to undergo three evolution processes. First it can disappear when the contact between the groups dies out, alternatively, when the contact situation increases, it will lead to one side learning the other's language and so the need for the Pidgin disappears and or develop into a fully-fledged language or Creole.

In language study, the evolution of a Creole out of a Pidgin is of great significance. Linguists call this process Creolization. Holmes defines a Creole as 'pidgin which has acquired native speakers', (2013:90). Aitchiso opines that Creoles arise when Pidgins become mother tongues (2003:177), while Wardhaugh says "*a Creole is often defined as a Pidgin that has become the first language of a new generation of speakers*" (1986:59). For Holmes, "*a Creole is a Pidgin which has expanded its structure and vocabulary to express the range of meanings and serve the range of functions required of a first language*" (95). In as much as the following typifies that for there to be a Creole there must be a Pidgin in existence, however, the processes of Pidginization and Creolization are diametrically opposed to each other. In this, Wardhaugh, opines that Pidginization processes involve the simplification of the structure of the languages involved – viz-a-viz reduction in morphology, syntax, functions, as well as phonological variation. On the other hand, Creolization witnesses the expansion of morphology and syntax, regularization of phonology, extensive borrowing of words from the local/mother tongue, etc. Simply put, the Pidgin language has no elaborate grammar while Creole has a highly transparent derivational process. Pidgins and Creoles are found in speech communities in Nigeria. While Creole exist in the south-south region of Nigeria (Warri, Sapele, Delta, Edo), Pidgins exist in the south-east regions (Imo, Rivers, Abia, etc). The above discourse is to explore how languages evolve when they come in contact.

In an appraisal of Holmes' and Trask's earlier mentioned stages of Pidgin evolution, the second stage can be likened to a situation where some of the language users become bilinguals. Bilingualism is the ability to speak two different languages by a person. It arises because of the languages in contact where one side learns the others' languages.

However, of a very high interest to the linguist (Sociolinguist) is bilingualism at the level of an entire society not the individual. In this, there is the desire to ascertain how communities determine "*who speaks what language to whom and when*". This entails that a language can be spoken to different people, at different occasions for different purposes. To achieve this, a speaker alters his language to suit the purpose. This then means that there will be varieties of the same language existing in a particular speech domain. Language scholars have come to refer to this as Diglossia or Bidialectalism.

Holmes then defined diglossia as a term used to describe societal or institutionalized bilingualism, where two varieties are required to cover all the community's domain. (2013:30). These two varieties are referred to as the Highly Valued/High (H) variety and the Less Valued/Low (L) variety. Most times, speakers specify at which function each one will be used. And their attitude and perception determines the variety each of them will be classified under. It is also worthy to note here that diglossic situations can occur between a language or two languages as the case maybe. This is brought to fore in Holmes' analysis of his concept of extended scope of diglossia which states that "*the term diglossia is generalized to cover any situation where two languages are used for different functions in a speech community, especially where one language is used for the H function and the other for the L functions*" (31). In this one can agree with the fact that diglossia is a linguistic division of labour resulting from languages in contact.

## **5. Historical linguistics and Language Contact: NP/NC in Perspective**

Historical linguistics refers to the historical development of languages as well as the possible contact a language could have had in the past. Philologists investigate the intricate etymologies of certain words in a particular language and to achieve this traced the origin of most words in a language to the contact with which the language in question had with other languages. They achieve this through an investigation into the historical evolution of the language. Through this, it became clear that languages as they come into contact do influence one another with various intensities and under various circumstances. Against this backdrop, one can situate the history of NP/NC. According to Elugbe and Omamor, the evolution of the NP could be traced to the trade

relationship between the visiting Europeans and the Nigerian multi-ethnicity and multi-lingual communities. Their first contact was with the Portuguese slave merchants which generated the Portuguese Pidgin (PP). Although this contact language was short-lived as it was replaced by the Dutch and later the English in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a situation which saw the emergence of English based Pidgin from where the Nigerian Pidgin is derived. It is worthy to note that the NP which evolved as a contact language came to be a native language of about 3-5 million Nigerians as well as a second language to another 75 million citizens approximately, Ndimele (1994:4).

The transcendence of this contact language as a native language or a mother tongue qualified it to be a Creole to the speakers, and as such, the Nigerian Creole. Elugbe and Omamor also lend credence to this as they opine that *“when a Pidgin has acquired native speakers, it is termed a Creole”*. Therefore the contact between the British and the Nigerian heterogeneous community lead to the emergence of two languages in Nigeria viz-a-viz the Nigerian Pidgin and Nigerian Creole, a phenomenon which constantly arisen the interest of language scholars especially with their peculiarity in the Nigerian situation. It has indeed gained high recognition by the Linguists and thus is classified as an L1, L2 as well as a Lingua Franca of many Nigerian tribes. You can find it being used in the electronic and print media, advertisement, church programme, political campaigns, literary works, music, informal conversation etc. However, because it has not acquired a stable orthography, sound system, and syntax, it is still being viewed as a Less Valued Variety in the diglossic terms as against its lexifier-the English Language. This has posed as a cog on the wheel of it being proclaimed a national language as proposed by some linguists.

Reiterating, this paper states that the NP/NC emerged out of contact situations in Nigeria and have further witnessed the concept of the extended scope of diglossia which Holmes’ (2013) posits. It brought to fore these diglossic situations as well as the possible reasons behind the less valued variety accorded them.

## **6. Analysis of Nigerian Creole and Nigerian Pidgin as Forms of Diglossic Languages**

As noted earlier, language contact in a heterogeneous speech community gives rise to variety of changes, one which is the creation of a unifying language. This created language is termed a contact language. It is in view of this that the Nigeria pidgin is always referred to by language scholars as a contact language which evolved to fulfill communication needs of the people in contact. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) would describe it as a language arising out of contact situations and also as a product of

multilingual situation where communication is made possible only through the improvisation of a language system to fulfill communication needs.

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) thus is a language which evolved out of two or more languages in contact (the English language and the local languages) to fulfill the purpose of communication for these groups of people without a common language. It can also be seen as a language which is created from a multilingual situation to serve as a common language which will fulfill the communication need of these people. Pidgin refers to the spontaneous creation of a language out of a mixture of other languages to serve as a means of communication between speakers of these different tongues.

From the foregoing discourse on the notion of pidgin, one can deduce the following. (a) A Pidgin cannot be claimed ownership by any speech community. (b) It solves the communication need in a multilingual situation. (c) It is not any speaker's mother tongue. In retrospect, Trask (2007) had opined that a Pidgin can undergo three stages, the third stage which is that a Pidgin can turn into a Mother Tongue (MT). This signifies that from the above observation, a Pidgin may not be any one's MT at least at the time of conception but it can undergo further evolution processes to become an MT. Put in a simpler form, a Pidgin language which was hitherto no one's MT can eventually become a speech community's MT. In the observation of this, the linguists termed this process as Creolization. Consequently, Creolization is a process by which a pidgin acquires the status of an MT, i.e., becomes the MT of a speech community. The above analysis draws its intellectual strength from Sebba (2002) who states that a Creole comes into being when children are born into a pidgin speaking community and acquire the pidgin as a first language (L1).

For further elucidation of the paper's point of view, the issue of national language will be briefly referred to. Nigeria as a multilingual nation has been experiencing agitations by language scholars on the inclusion of Nigerian Pidgin as a national language. Speaking for this, Elugbe and Omamor asserts that "*if Nigeria were in need of a national language that would not be associated with any linguistic or tribal group, Nigerian Pidgin (NP) would be a choice*" (1991:148). NP has come to be in Nigeria; however, part of the obstacle towards its choice as a national language is due to the negative attitude of government policies as well as Nigerians towards it, especially the educated class. Although one can premise such attitude on the confusion between NP and Broken' English' which is a resultant effect of the ill-formed early versions of Pidgins evolvment. Be that as it may, NP's viability as a means of communication is undeniable and linguists in recent studies have come to recognize it as a possible way out of the quest for a national language. However, situating NP in the context of diglossia, the language, because of its negative perception in the nation at the moment

is analysed here as a Less Valued (L) variety, as comparable with the English language which is the Highly Valued (H) variety. This paper's classification is in consonance with the perception of language and diglossic situations globally. Holmes (2013:29) observes that *"Haiti has been described as another diglossic situation by some linguists, with French as the 'H' variety and Haitian Creole as the 'L' variety"*. It is revealing that in Haiti, the 1983 constitution declared both French and Creole (Haitian Creole) as national languages, yet the people consider French, the only real language and an 'H' variety and ignores the existence of Haitian Creole which is widely used by people and friends for their daily interactions. One can deduce such similarity in negative attitude to NP in favour of English language in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the classification of the NP as an L variety also hinges on Holmes analogy that *"a pidgin can be as useful as a lingua franca that it may be expanded and used even by people who share tribal language.... In multilingual speech communities, parents may use a pidgin so extensively during the day, in the markets, at church, in offices and on public transport ...."* (93). for the 'L' variety of a language, its use is usually for informal purposes and at informal settings and this is the case of NP at present.

More so, Holmes further opines that *"people generally admire the 'H' variety even when they can't understand it. Attitudes to it are usually very respectful. It has acquired prestige"* (29). And for the 'L' variety, this author further asserts that *"people generally do not think of the 'L' variety as worth describing. However, attitudes to 'L' variety are varied and often ambivalent"* (29).

The Nigerian Creole on another hand can also be situated in the diglossic context. A Creole as briefly explored earlier is a linguistic situation where a Pidgin language attains the status of an L1 of a linguistic community. Holmes, 2013 would define it as a *"Pidgin which has acquired native speakers"* (90). To attain this status, a Pidgin has its lexical items and grammatical structures expanded and elaborated on. If a pidgin can undergo changes and grow to a Creole, it means a Creole can also undergo its own changes, especially when it is in contact with its parent language (the lexifier). In this, one can understand and agree to the versatility and evolving nature of language as a social phenomenon which is explicable through the concept of language contact/contact linguistics. A Creole therefore, when developing, results to what the linguists call a Post- Creole Continuum which means a post- Creole continuing to emerge. This gives rise to de-creolization which is a situation whereby the standard language (the lexifier) exerts much influence on the Creole with the Creole acquiring most of its lexical items from its lexifier. The focus of this research in relation to diglossic and language contact is on the varieties of Creoles in this Post- Creole Continuum. These varieties or otherwise referred to as the lectal levels include: the basilect, mesolect and



acrolect. It is in the study of these lectal levels that one can possibly posit that a diglossic situation is at work. A brief explanation of these lectal levels will illumine this fact.

A Basilect is regarded as the broadest form of a Creole with the highest number of speakers. It is the most colloquial amongst the three and the least prestigious variety of Creole spoken by people of low economic status, majority of who are mostly uneducated. For Deumert, 2004, words in the basilect are considered colloquial or slang expression. For the Nigerian Creole, few examples include:

*'dem kom now now'* – they just arrived.

*'na mi tel am'* – I told him

*'yu no wan chop'* - Do you not want to eat?

*'see dem'* - look at them.

*'I go see una tomorrow'* - I will see all of you tomorrow.

For the Mesolect, Sebba(2002) views as any variety of language in a Creole continuum which is intermediate between the Basilect and the Acrolect. In Mesolect is this process of indigenization where code mixing of the indigenous languages (substrats) comes to play. This means that words are borrowed from the indigenous languages into the standard English (super strat) Examples include:

*'yu bi wayo person'* - You are a cheat

*'Dis girl na lekpa shandi'* - This girl is slim

*'Mai oga'* – My master/ my superior

NB: *'wayo'* is a word in Hausa language which means 'a cheat'; *'lekpa shandi'* is of a Yoruba origin which means 'a slim person': while *'oga'* is of Igbo which means 'my master'.

Lastly, the Acrolect has a close similarity with the Standard English. Escure (1997) defines it as a linguistic innovation characterized by the incorporation of linguistic feature which have their origin in contact situation. This entails that acrolects derive most of its linguistic features and innovations from the language in contact. It is in this that some linguists tend to situate the Nigerian English. The use of acrolects in Nigeria depends on the formality of the situation. Examples:-

am coming --- This is an expression said when one is actually going.

He is not on seat --- said when the person being looked for is not in the/his office.

She is the only lekpa on Campus --- refers to one's body structure

Let us break early morning kolanut --- refers to offering a visitor 'kolanut' in the morning. (kolanut is a form of traditional entertainment giving to one's visitor)

From the above varieties and lectal levels of a Creole, one can analyse these diglossic situations that while the basilect and mesolect functions as the 'L' variety, the acrolect is the 'H' variety of this post-Creole continuum. This postulation is premised on Sebba's definition of an acrolect as a Creole variety that commands respect because its grammatical structure has no significant deviation from the standard variety of English language. What is being said here is that, since these varieties exist in the Nigerian Creole, and diglossia is a situation where varieties of the same language have the 'H' and 'L' status accorded them, therefore the basilect as well as the mesolect of the Nigerian Creole functions as 'L' variety and the acrolect as the 'H' variety.

## 6. Conclusion

Language is an evolving phenomenon thus its concepts, theories and perceptions are always changing. Attempt has been made by this research to situate diglossic situations as a resultant effect of language contact in which the Nigerian Pidgin and Nigerian Creole have been cited as possible in stances of diglossia when placed side by side with the concept globally. It also revealed diglossic instances in the Nigerian Creoles lectal levels where the basilect and mesolect are analysed as less valued variety and the acrolect as highly valued variety.

The research anchoring its stance on the concepts of language contact is of the view that the existence of diglossia in the Nigerian linguistic situation is as a result of the linguistic culture which has kept it. In this, the paper referred to the perceived low variety accorded to NP as a factor of the speech community's belief system about the language, viz-viz, origin, belief about 'good or 'bad' language, etc. This is a major problem that has given life to the term diglossia in language contact situation. As a matter of fact, language attitude as it relates to Nigerian pidgin situation, in this case, the negative attitude has succeeded in placing NP as a less valued variety as against the English language.

The research further discovered that in a diglossic situation it is the context of language use and not the class or membership of the users that controls it. The 'H' and 'L' label is a function solely of social context significance and not of social identity of the speaker. However, diglossic situations in the Nigerian context with reference to NP is a function of class and social status, where speakers have negative perception of the languages, where they refer to it as for the uneducated and low income class.

This paper has situated diglossic situations to the Nigerian Pidgin and Creole context; it has come to say that, the fact that a language is diglossic is actually a feature of the linguistic culture of the area where the language is used, rather than the language itself.

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