

An abstract, colorful background featuring a grid of squares in various shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. A hand is visible in the center, holding a pen and writing on a surface.

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CHAPTER

21



NIGERIAN PIDGIN: SOME MATTERS ARISING

Ben Elugbe

Introduction

The volume of literature on Nigerian Pidgin (NP) continues to rise. Yet, as we see in Aziza (2012), the language has been changing since Elugbe and Omamor (1991) to the point where she has had to label it 'Modern Nigerian Pidgin'. In Elugbe and Omamor (1991), attention is devoted to the question of what NP is and how it differs from some other forms of English in Nigeria, such as the language of *Wakabout*, a column in the defunct *Lagos Weekend*, and the language of the soap opera called *Masquerade*, especially the English spoken by its lead character, Chief Zebrudiah Okorigwe Nwogbo, alias '4.30'. Elugbe (1995) referred to it as 'Offensive Nigerian English' (ONE) and provided some elaboration of it in Elugbe and Mgbemena (2007). In his very useful elaboration of Nigerian Pidgin, Jibril (1995) takes issue with Elugbe and Omamor over their claim that the language of *Wakabout* is not NP.

The view of NP in Elugbe and Omamor (1991) suffers from the two extremities of the pidgin continuum. First is the normal/original view of a pidgin as a 'makeshift language'. In Bamgbose (1995), which is one work that expressly classifies the varieties of English in Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin is identified as part of what Bamgbose refers to as 'Contact English'. The other strand of Contact English (CE) is Broken English (BE). According to Bamgbose (1999:12), "Contact English is often illustrated by the famous entries in Antera Duke's diary of events in Calabar between 1785 and 1788" (1995:12).

Bamgbose goes on to say (p.13) that the language of Antera Duke's diary 'is an example of Broken English'.

By contrast, Elugbe and Omamor (1991) say that "... one cannot but see a relationship between the language of Antera Duke's diary and earlier forms of NP."

Then, in a statement that would support Bamgbose's position, Elugbe and Omamor say that "... chunks of the language in question are reminiscent of varieties of substandard English ..."

Finally, in a near-volte-face Elugbe and Omamor warn:

Describing the language of Antera Duke's diary as some kind of substandard English is not in any way equivalent to a claim that it does not represent an earlier stage in the development of NP ...
(p.31)

The second source of confusion comes from the question regarding the cut-off point between new or modern varieties of NP and the Standard English. In short, is NP de-creolizing or converging with English?

NP and Classical Definitions of a Pidgin

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) cite a number of classical definitions of a pidgin, of which the most comprehensive appears to be that of Todd (1974:1), which says that a pidgin 'arises to fulfil certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language'. This easily confirms the contact theory in the definition of pidgins. What it does not do at this point is say something of how we are to identify a pidgin *structurally*.

In a classical sense, we have no records of pidgins. What we refer to as a pidgin usually has a functional lexicon and a systematic and consistent use of some grammatical collocations. Its morphology is basically non-existent—meaning that it avoids the luxury of affixes.

When the language of Antera Duke's diary is referred to both as a form of Broken English and equally as an ancestral form of NP, this raises the question whether or not there is some overlap between ancestral forms of NP and Broken English. The same question is raised by the fact that, as Deuber has said, "Prejudices that Nigerian Pidgin is some form of Broken English persists to some extent in popular perceptions" (2005:1).

If there was an overlap, what was the manner of it? Was it a form of lexical overlap or a grammatical one?

There is no doubt that some form of lexical overlap existed and still exists between these two varieties of English in Nigeria. This lexical overlap is unavoidable because both Broken English and Nigerian Pidgin draw from the same language—English. For example, a common lexical item such as 'yam' is the same in all three varieties: Standard English, Broken English, and Nigerian Pidgin. If we reject 'yam' on the grounds that it is a cultural item, we may take an item of basic vocabulary such as 'head'

which is 'head' in all three varieties. However, when we take a verb such as 'sleep', NP will use 'sleep' in all grammatical situations while Standard English will use the forms 'sleep, sleeping, slept, slept'—the last two being the past tense and the past participial forms. In Broken English, it is difficult—perhaps near-impossible—to predict what individual users of Broken English will say. This lack of consistency or predictability certainly separates Broken English from NP. Nonetheless, it is easy to imagine the fact that during the so-called 'baby-talk' stage (see Elugbe and Omamor, 1991:27-31) a future pidgin must have a measure of inconsistency. At that point, there is some overlap between Broken English and an emerging pidgin form of English. This observation would hold true for all dominant languages and their emerging 'broken' and 'pidgin' forms in a contact situation.

In contrast to Broken and beginning forms of a pidgin, NP has rules and speakers can react to certain forms or supposed utterances in NP by saying that they are incorrect or unacceptable. Thus, I would react to a statement such as *Na for Lagos I slept* ('it is in Lagos that I slept/spent the night') as *not* NP.

Stability and its Effect on NP

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) describe what they consider the stabilizing influences on Nigerian Pidgin. They point out that although Standard British English was available in a formal education system, it was not accessible to all. I should add that the process of acquiring literacy in Standard English was slow. The linguistic needs of the contact situation between the British and the local Nigerian population were too urgent to await the arrival of Standard British English via the formal literacy (i.e. the school) system.

Nigerian Pidgin also became more stable when Nigerians who had no language in common began to use it amongst themselves—even when the British were not around or involved. This meant that the new tongue was becoming Nigerian (indigenized) and relevant in an ever increasing range of activities. This was a major factor in the stabilization of NP. In this situation, stabilization is a child of frequent use.

Mafeni (1971) draws our attention to the role of urbanization in the development of NP. Urbanization draws together people of different ethnic origins, thus creating in one place the same conditions that encouraged the rise of NP in coastal Nigeria. NP in urban Nigeria, therefore, came after its implantation in the multi-ethnic areas of Nigeria's Atlantic coast.

All the stabilising factors mentioned above ensured that NP became stable and gradually metamorphosed into a *language*—a fluid language no doubt, but one with recognizable, if relatively simple, structural characteristics. This is the watershed that Broken English will never reach

or cross. Since Broken English is rule-free and unpredictable, it does not offer a stable form for promotion or propagation. By contrast, the widening use of NP means that it is approaching a point where its constituency is now horizontally national and vertically without dividing lines based on education (see below for a minor modification). On the other hand, Broken English is firmly rooted in attempts by its speakers to reach Standard English. Its practitioners will strive to break free of it with varying degrees of success.

There are, by the way, those who speak Broken – i.e. *incorrect*—English and believe that it is superior to a pidginised form of English, such as NP (see Elugbe and Mgbemena, 2007). Chief Zebrudiah, who speaks an obscene/offensive form of Broken English, actually thinks that he is superior to his wife who speaks a steady form of NP. Indeed he sometimes accuses his wife of exhibiting a ‘lack of no grammatical ability’ when she is confused by his obscenely substandard English.

Varieties of NP

Varieties of Nigerian Pidgin can be sought geographically—i.e. horizontally—as well as vertically—i.e. educationally. The geographic differences in NP appear to be more obvious than its vertical differences. In other words, it is easier to say that someone is speaking a Northern variety than that one is speaking a graduate or school certificate or minimum education variety of NP. That is why I said above that NP does not have vertical distinctions between its varieties. Even so, the minor modification I mentioned above should be noted here. It is one thing to say that education-based distinctions are difficult to identify in the varieties of NP; it is another to say that vertical or education-based varieties do not exist at all when in fact they do.

In general, there are issues with determining the varieties of NP. There is the issue of geographic or horizontal varieties of NP. Few would have problems using phonetic variation to identify broadly Northern and Southern varieties of NP. The near-total dominance of Hausa in the North means that the NP of the North is fairly easily identified and separated from the Southern varieties. For example, the influence of Hausa is evident in the fact that it is five vowels that are significant or phonemic in the Northern variety of NP. The five vowels are seen in (1):

(1) Hausa vowels

i	u
e	o
	a

As with Hausa-influenced varieties of Standard English, these are the vowels found in the main variety of NP in the North.

Let us note at this point that the North is not and probably was not as monolithically 'north' as we always assumed. For one thing, in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, only one, the North-west is Hausa to the core, if we ignore its extremely minor languages. The Northeast is more linguistically diverse, but that diversity is submerged under a Hausa language dominance. The North-central zone can be seen as having a western, an eastern and a northern part which is also fairly dominated by Hausa. The eastern part of it, which has Benue and Kogi States in the main, is free of Hausa dominance. The southern fringes of Niger State and the whole of Kwara State are dominated by Yoruba, which is, along with some of its dialects, indigenous to the said areas. In all these parts, NP is not strong and does not have a 'Northern' flavour or colouration. A truly northern variety of NP may have a consonant problem involving the mixing up of /f/ and /p/. This is to be found in varieties of Standard English in the North.

In the South, NP is associated mainly with the South-south zone. In particular, it was generally agreed that the hub of NP was the Warri-Sapele area of today's Delta State (Schnukal and Marchese, 1982). Following work by Faraclas in the 80's leading up to his 1996 grammar, Port Harcourt became recognized as another hub. However, there is no suggestion that the Port Harcourt variety has replaced the Warri-Sapele variety as the 'standard' variety or dialect of NP. I find that there is not too much of a difference between the Warri-Sapele and the Port Harcourt dialects. It is possible to conclude that Akwa Ibom and Cross River have a fairly recognizable variety of NP because of the weakening rule by which /t/ and a devoiced /d/ become a voiced alveolar tap between vowels. Consider the following:

(2) The flapping rule in Akwa Ibom NP

/iguud o/	→	[igur o]	'It's really good!'
/ikɔtɛkpɛnɛ/	→	[ikɔɾɛkpɛnɛ]	'IkotEkpene'

Intelligibility is a common criterion for determining if given varieties may be taken as dialects of the same language or not. In the case of NP, it is clearly a different language from Standard English. We know that they are *not* mutually intelligible, even though illiterate speakers of NP normally think and claim that they are speaking Standard English. However, in a genetic classification, NP and English must be assumed—and should be found—to belong to the same immediate group or family. As for the varieties of NP, they are all mutually intelligible. It is unheard of that a true speaker of one of the varieties does not understand another one. The reason for this is that changing the vocabulary of a language is the easiest way to make it unintelligible. Therefore, mutual intelligibility is ensured between varieties of NP because they all draw on English for their words.

An emerging variety of NP that we cannot but mention is the radio one. In Benin City, Calabar, Port Harcourt, and Warri, a radio-based variety of Nigerian Pidgin is emerging. This variety is changing very fast because of the tendency of the radio presenters to employ with quite some abandon, the well-known ability of NP to lend itself to individual creativity. As with geographical varieties of NP, localised vocabulary is the most likely source of variation. This localisation of vocabulary does mean that intelligibility will be reduced for those who do not live in a particular area or do not tune in to some given radio stations.

Overall, it must be noted that the most common form appears to be the Warri-Sapele variety. At a recent three-hour forum on NP at the West African Languages Congress (WALC 2013) at the University of Ibadan, a radio journalist openly claimed that the cream of NP is the Warri-Sapele variety. Nobody contradicted him.

Convergence or 'Modernization'

As I mentioned above, Aziza (2012) referred to NP as now spoken in the Warri-Sapele axis as 'modern'. In point of fact, her primary aim is:

an analysis of some syntactic features of the NP spoken today in Warri by young people aged between 18 and 30 years in order to determine whether what the young people speak is a general NP or a decreolising variety. (p.3)

The issue of decreolization or possible convergence between a pidgin and the language on which it is based (in this case English) is not new. The case of NP and English is mentioned in Elugbe and Omamor (1991). What may be taken as one of the issues that make it 'modern' in Aziza's thinking is the fact that "it has a more elaborated grammatical system than the general NP, and is fast becoming the language of intergenerational transmission" (p.3).

In the data presented by Aziza to support her position that NP in the Warri area is decreolizing is evidence that the use of grammatical affixes is now part of NP. Aziza refers to the form of NP that is favoured by purists such as Mafeni (1971) and Elugbe and Omamor (1991) as 'general NP'.

(2) Plural Formation in 'General NP' (from Aziza 2013)

- 1a. Di draivadəm de kəm
the driver pl aux. come
"The drivers are coming"
- 1b. A no si di tishadəm
I neg. see the teacher pl.
"I did not see the teachers".

Professor Aziza has now presented data that show that in the area on

which her study is based, the formation of the plural form of nouns involves the plural /s/ as in Standard English. Moreover, the normal S-form is now an alternative to the one that combines the pure NP strategy with the English form—as we see in (4) below:

- (4) Plural formation strategies in ‘Modern NP’ (Aziza 2013: 4)
- 2a. Di draivas de kòm / Di draivasdèm de kòm “The drivers are coming”
the drivers aux. come / the drivers pl. aux come
- b. A no si di tishas / A no si di tishasdèm “I did not see the teachers”.
I neg. see the teachers / I neg. see the teachers pl.
- c. Wi tɛlawa gads mek dèm no it/Wi tɛl awa gadsdèm mek dèm no it
We tell our guards make they neg. eat
“We told our guards not to eat”
- d. Tu bosis don lod go / Tu bosisdèm don lod go
Two buses perf. load go
“Two buses have been loaded and have left”
- e. Plenti shòshis de dis rod / Plenti shòshisdèm de dis rod
Plenty churches (pl.) loc. this road
“There are many churches on this road”

Aziza’s data show that, in addition to the traditional strategy of postposing ‘dèm’ after the singular form, there are now two additional strategies in plural formation in the NP variety described by her:

- a. Add a suffix -s to the singular form as in Standard English: Di draivas de kòm
- b. Add ‘dèm’ to this -s form in a kind of double marking: Di draivasdèm de kòm

Aziza also presents a new strategy in which irregular forms of the plural are used in this so-called modern form: Di mèn de wòk / Di mèndèm de wòk (2013: 5, ex. 3a).

As I do not intend to present the whole of Aziza’s paper, I will only add that she cites some other syntactic evidence of convergence between NP and Standard English. These include number, gender and case in pronouns, where instead of ‘we’ as the object form of the 1st person plural, the form ‘us’ is employed. Thus /i no fit kili we / becomes /i no fit kil us/ ‘he cannot kill us’. In this example, according to Aziza’s finding, /i/ refers to ‘he/it’ because the feminine form is now /ʃi/ ‘she’.

When it comes to question formation, I am not convinced that Aziza’s claim that the Low-High ending in Yes/No questions is a new development. I consider myself a speaker of what Aziza calls ‘general NP’ and I have always asked ‘Yes/No’ questions with a LH or Rising/High on the last syllable.

Now, if NP were to develop the affixes and the morphological

alternations that are creeping into Warri NP, it would become that much more difficult to acquire. It is surely no accident that NP has virtually no morphology: It makes it that much easier to acquire. Since a large percentage of the Nigerian population is still illiterate not only in English, but in general, the 'modern' variety of NP described by Aziza must be restricted to educated people – as her own findings reveal. Hence, rather than suggest that her finding points to a new/modern NP, we should say that there is an emergent educated variety of NP. What would be helpful is to compare this with the NP of illiterates.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I set myself no goals to be met. I only tried to raise matters that I think researchers in the area of Nigerian Pidgin should be looking at. Hence I have asked the question 'How are we to separate NP from other strands of English in Nigeria?' Are there now varieties of NP? In the course of raising these issues, I have been forced to do some thinking and even re-thinking. The resourcefulness and creativity in the way individuals use NP is raising a mainly lexical question in the issue of NP varieties/dialects both horizontally (between geographic areas), vertically between levels of speakers' education, and professionally between kinds of usage such as the media. All in all, the field of NP studies promises us a lot of excitement in the coming decades.

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