AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 13 Number 2
June, 2026

Sociolinguistic Motivations for the Use of Nigerian Pidgin English in Nigeria

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Abstract

English pidginisation is a process by which pidgin English develops through the contact of English with other languages. While structural English pidginisation refers to the simplification in using the English, sociolinguistic English pidginisation is the process by which the English is transformed by society. Although the sociolinguistic pidginisation of English is observed to have received considerable attention as much that of structural pidginisation, the need for reinvestigating it, in addition to finding out how Nigerians use the pidgin for survival, becomes necessary. Using a qualitative research design, this study investigates the social motivations for the use of Nigerian Pidgin English among Nigerians and examines how such usage influences their social and economic experiences. Ten participants, comprising males and females, purposively selected from diverse social and educational backgrounds, were interviewed. Results for the first objective

reveal that nine social factors including low educational attainment, accommodation familiarity and solidarity motivate Nigerians to use Nigerian English pidgin in the Nigerian context. For the second objective, results indicate that using the Nigerian pidgin English positively shapes the living conditions of Nigerians by enabling them to trade favourably and campaign for votes in politics. Regardless of the increasing negative attitudes formed towards NPE and the low status it continues to attract, it remains the most effective means for bringing together in conversation people from different backgrounds in Nigeria. As a language of survival, a Nigerian hardly avoids involving in a compelling circumstances to use the NPE.

Keywords: Pidgidnisation; Nigerian Pidgin English; Language in Contact; Social Motivation; Sociolinguistics

Introduction

A major consequence of Languages in contact is pidginisation – that is, the development of pidgin, resulting from bringing together and simplifying the structures of languages for mutual intelligibility among the native users of the languages in contact (Crystal, 1992). The conference of 1968 on pidginisation (and creolisation) represents a major discussion which features Samarin's (1971) publication on the concepts of ‘salient’ (mixing of words) and ‘substantive’ (simplification of structure) as the two defining processes of pidginisation. Hymes (2020) reports the contributions made on the social context of the established pidgins and creoles, their status and uses, with the observation that the concept of pidginisation is still vague. In Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), because the coverage of ‘pidginisation’ has not yet been clearly understood, ‘pidgin formation’ has been suggested to be used instead. Subsequent studies only follow the approach that pidginisation is concerned with reconfiguring the lexis and structure of the native languages in contact to produce a pidgin.

Instead of the (theoretical) linguistic pidginisation approach, this study reintroduces Hymes' (2020) sociolinguistic pidginisation

approach, which, as it applies to this study, is concerned with investigating the social motivation process of the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). Instead of using one of the languages in coexisting in Nigeria, how and why the NPE is used for more effective communication and better living forms the focus of this study.

Like language, the pidginisation can either be in community – in which case the pidgin is collectively shaped by its users, or be in an individual – in which case the individual determines the way he uses it (Hudson, 1996). As it is considered in the study, the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is rather placed in the mind of an individual Nigerian, contrary to the study of Ojarikre (2013) which attempts to codify the orthography of the NPE for uniformity. However, because English varies at the group level (Carrie, 2017), the NPE – which is equally considered as a language in this regard, varies at the level of individual, who creatively uses it with style to serve his unique, changing experiences (Hudson, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Instead of focusing on this unavoidable individual variation in the use of the NPE with the view to finding the motivations for it, and how such an individualised use of the NPE influences the life of the individual user, authors frequently approach the NPE and, of course, pidgin in general, historically and using the standard language ideology which prescribes uniformity in using the NPE. Khan and Akter (2021) is a typical example in which the origin and evolution of the pidgin in Bangladesh is given, providing a basis for developing a unique historical linguistic theory and justifying the status of pidgin as a fully developed language. These represent the essential issue emerging from the previous studies, in which the present study is anchored.

Objectives of the Research

The research is set out to find out:

(a) the social motivations for English pidginisation in individual Nigerians.

(b) how the use of NPE influences the lives of its users in Nigerian community.

Research Questions

From the research objectives, the research questions are:

(a) What are the social motivations for English pidginisation in individual Nigerians?

(b) How does the use of NPE influence the lives of its users in Nigerian community?

Literature Review

Language typology, as reported by Algeo (2010), specifies that no language is sourceless – as, for example, English first developed as the sum of the three previously existing Germanic (mutually intelligible) languages of Saxon, Jute and Angel. The sum is different from pidgin, which Jowitt (1991) describes as a hybridised language for sourcing its items from the (mutually unintelligible) languages in contact. However, both language and pidgin are eclectic because each drives its items from multiple sources, with the difference that, for English, the items are many, similarly and coherent and. For pidgin, the items are few, dissimilar and incoherent, in form, meaning and structure. It explains why in pidginisation, structures, words and styles are shortened, as different speech communities attempt to communicate with one another with no one acquiring the pidgin as a native language as used essentially for marketing (Crystal, 1992).

Being broken in structure and shortened in words and styles have not incapacitated the NPE in effectively communicating the needs of its users, instead as it is shown in the results, it speeds up the users' communication in a witty, intelligible way, as the users realise their unique communicative purposes. Because the NPE is no longer confined in use to the market speech situation for its effectiveness in socially equalising the users from different backgrounds and building mutual trust among them (Ojo, 2020;

Affia, 2023), the interviewees employed for the study come from different endevours.

Before the Nigerian independence when the English in Nigeria was rather foreign to Nigerians, Brosnahan (1958), based on educational attainment, categorises the Nigerian English into four, with the NPE placed as the first category, marked by no formal education. The reason for using the independent factor of education while ignoring other factors by Brosnahan is its direct correlation with English proficiency as at then, and even presently the correlation holds in some specific Nigerian speech situations. Although Brosnahan specifies that the mesolectal Nigerian English variant then as the second category (used by secondary school finishers) who formed most of the English-speaking Nigerians, it is currently not the reality in Affia (2023), who reasons that the NPE has the most populated users of English in Nigeria because it is used by all Nigerian English-speaking population and in at least every speech situations .

In what appears to be a review to Brosnahan's sociolinguistics-based categorisation, Banjo (1971) forms the linguistic-based variation, similarly into four. The first variant (equivalent of Brosnahan's first category) is where the NPE is neatly placed for its interfered mother-tongue features, resulting to users resorting to using Nigerian English pidgin.

Brosnahan's education-based and Banjo's linguistics-based schemas of Nigerian English use are integrated with an addition of the feature of intelligibility in Odumuh's (1987) sociophonetic schema, as only the phonological features of Nigerian English are considered. Like those of Brosnahan and Banjo, Odumuh identifies non-standard, basic (or general), standard (or educated) and sophisticated (or near-perfect) as the four varieties of spoken Nigerian English. By the description, the first, non-standard category suitably describes the NPE for demonstrating the

performances of beginners whose education in English is scarce and had a limited English speech encounters both in and outside of primary school. As such the linear and non-linear features of their English speech mother-tongue-based, accompanied by improper choice of words and expressions, making it unable to be accepted and intelligible internationally. Because of the related descriptions of NPE support the views that it considerably demonstrates the sociolinguistic and cultural environment of Nigeria (Jowitt, 1992; 1915) and the psycho-social needs of Nigerians (Adegbite, 2010; Ugorji, 2015).

In a way, Brosnahan, Banjo, and Odumuh's schemas inadequately consider the influence of the Nigerian indigenous languages on the English usage of Nigerians. This inadequacy is observed and explicitly incorporated into the schema formulated by Jowitt (1991). The schema is called 'Popular Nigerian English' (PNE). Jowitt says that the English usage of every Nigerian is a combination standard (or RP) and the PNE forms. The PNE comprises, in terms of mother-tongue or ethnicity, the Nigerian sub-variant usages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba native speakers and, in terms of class, variants and errors. The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba affiliated variants are labelled following their initials as PNE(H), PNE(I) and PNE(Y), where the optional letters are replaceable by any other Nigerian indigenous languages. But the original selection of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in the schema is because they are by far the major Nigerian languages in terms of number of speakers, spread and standardisation.

It has been pointed out in the introduction that pidgin develops not as a native language. Historically, a major condition for the pidginisation is the existence of a dominant language (called 'superstrate language' or 'lexifier language' (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015)) based on which the pidgin is developed (Holmes, 2013). Since English was the dominant language of the Caribbean slave plantation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pidgin

developed by the West African slaves was English-based, to be able to communicate with their colonialists, who were native users of the English. While the concept of pidgin – derived from the Greek 'pidjom' meaning 'trade' or 'exchange' – developed for instrumental, rather than integrative, purpose, it is not for group identification, but viewed as an expression of impoliteness, marked by simple, babyish structure, signifying lack of formal education (Holmes, 2013). Mere theoretical linguistic points such as these immediately and absolutely find validation only if the central issue of intelligibility is not brought up. If English was formed singularly on the basis of intelligibility which held the Germanic tribes of Saxon, Jute and Angle, without the least show of social identity or attitude the same informed criteria of intelligibility, if used, makes the (NPE variant of) pidgin a language.

The NPE is, however, currently creolised as newly born Nigerians living especially in settings of mixed speech communities acquire it as their first language (Ibrahim, 2016). This is evident in his findings that the preposition 'fo' (for 'for') carries at least 22 meanings in use, with the conclusion that the NPE is simple and neutral, uniting Nigerians, while endangering their indigenous languages, although. With this favourable attitude to the NPE, shown in the way some distinguished Nigerian authors and musicians respectively use it in writing and singing, and of course as used on the print and electronic media, Ibrahim reports that the concept of 'Naija' has been created as a preferable alternative for the NPE in attempting to make it not only as an identity but also as a means for escaping the stigma of derogatorily labelling the national variants of pidgin as babyish, debased, barstardised, jargonised, vulgarisd and broken.

Because of the unifying force it carries in Nigeria, with culturally diverse speech communities, the NPE should be made the national language (Ehondor, 2020). This, together with other sociolinguistic considerations, supports the free development NPE as a language

like any other, with its orthography to be indigenised (Ojarikre, 2013), and because pidgins around the world are not baby-talk but real languages with serious purposes, each possesses a distinct, describable structure (Holmes, 2013).

Clearly, every variant of a language is a standard; what makes is otherwise is the attitude developed towards it. Such an attitude is what translates into discriminating against speakers of pidgin. However, with the currency in use of the NPE by Nigerians from all endevours and regardless of the speech situation, the stigmatisation is fading away, giving substance to this study for providing results of qualitatively investigating the pidginisation in individuals who use the NPE to liberate themselves from the prescriptive attitude shown by Nigerian society in repressing the creative linguistic mind of a Nigerian individual.

Theoretical Framework

It has been given at the end of the introduction that the framework of sociolinguistics is the theory within which the study is conducted. The reason for using the sociolinguistic theory has been provided all through the sections of introduction and literature review where works on how patterns of interaction among Nigerians and with non-Nigerians give rise to the NPE, which in turn shapes the lives of the Nigerians. Having established above also that NPE is a language and therefore a linguistic identity for most of the English-speaking Nigerians, its evolution and current use are most suitably accounted for using the framework of sociolinguistic theory.

Language and society is the concern of sociolinguistics, with the main interest in the socially motivated variation within a language (Trudgill, 2000). With particular interest in pidgin, the NPE is one of the socially motivated variations of pidgin, requiring the sociolinguistic theory to explain it, given these research objectives of determining the development of the NPE in individuals and how

the individuals leverage it to live. For instance, using the sociolinguistic perspective enables the comparison of West African variants of pidgin, with the conclusion that the NPE develops faster than the Ghana and Cameroon's variants among the younger generation who are discovered to have favourable attitudes to their respective pidgins for being the primary agents for expansion of the pidgins (Ofulue, 2012).

Language attitude and language variation are the two basic research areas in sociolinguistics as respectively established in Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum (1960) and Labov (1963; 1966). Language variation as arguably generated by language attitude is the focal point of sociolinguistics (Watt, 2007). However, since sociolinguistics studies all levels of socially informed variations in language, the pidgin offers a unique language experience for a unique pattern of sociolinguistic theory to emerge.

Methodology

The design of the research is qualitative. It adopts the qualitative design essentially because of the two objectives the research sets out to achieve, requiring to find out about the social motivation for the use of NPE and how it influences the survival of its users. Such objectives need qualitative questions to tease the needed qualitative responses for the research objectives and questions to be addressed. In this regard, the instrument of interview is used to elicit such qualitative responses using a set of semi-structured questions. The theoretical framework of sociolinguistics adopted for conducting the research is another essential motivation for using the qualitative design. This is because one of the concerns of sociolinguistics is how language functions in society – which this study, in the same way, accounts for how NPE functions in Nigerian society.

Ten participants made of five males and five females form the sample size. This was considered suitable because they were

purposively selected. The competent responses obtained from the participants were adequate in terms of quality and considerably justify the fact that using more number of participants could have resulted to duplication of responses. However, the purposive selection of participants was conducted in a way that variations in social, age, gender, occupational, educational, regional and ethnic identities of the participants were represented. Specifically, those selected were: a female politician, aged man, young female writer, a male graduate, a less educated aged female trader, a male banker, a female farmer, a rich married southern Nigerian woman, a poor married northern Nigerian man and a young male musician.

As shown under sample and sampling above, ten interviews were conducted. They were conducted in six days by the researcher, who at the same time audio-recorded each. While eight of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, the remaining two were conducted on phone due to distance. Before conducting each of the interviews, consent of the interviewee was sought and willingly given for recording, with the promise of concealing the identity of the interviewee. A set of semi-structured questions, supported by follow-up questions were used to elicit the responses. The interviews were later transcribed by the researcher, while carefully ignoring those potions that indicate repetitions.

Data Analysis

Results for Research Question 1

Certain conditions motivate every Nigerian to use the NPE to some extent. As expressed by *Interviewee 3*, '… you will never avoid speaking pidgin.' When the *Interviewee 3 was* asked to know why, he responded that 'So long as you are in Nigeria, you must find some situation that you have to speak in pidgin even if you do not like it.' Without asking for further responses, the *Interviewee 3* continued:

Interviewee 3: Many people can't speak English.

Interviewer: What do you mean by English?

Interviewee 3: I mean good English.
Interviewer: Why?
Interviewee 3: They didn't go to school?
Clearly from the *Interviewee 3*'s responses above, low competence in English resulting from low educational attainment is one motivation for English pidginisation in Nigeria. However, the *Interviewee 3* stated that '… even the educated speak the pidgin English with [sic] themselves and even with those that didn't go to school.' when he was asked if the educated speak the English.
On the last point above, *Interviewee 1* stressed that '… pidgin is not only spoken because one is not educated. People speak it because they are friends and they want to be understood'.

Interviewer: Are you saying that if people are not friends they can't use it?
Interviewee 1: No. people that are not friends speak it too. But friends that are educated speak the pidgin for fun and togetherness.
Interviewer: So, does it mean that speaking in good English doesn't show fun?
Interviewee 1: It does not make the discussion lively. It looks as if you are not close friends.

The second, third and fourth motivations for the English pidginisation in Nigeria emerge from the *Interviewee 1*'s responses above – accommodation, familiarity and solidarity. An educated Nigerian uses the NPE to accommodate or get socially equalised to the less educated who cannot competently use the standardised English. However, using the NPE between two educated Nigerians is a demonstration of their familiarity with and solidarity for each other. In corroboration, *Interviewer 2* responded that 'I cannot speak confidently with my friends in English. She added that 'Pidgin is the natural language we speak.' Further, she said that '… using English makes us feel we pretend or show off ourselves. And I don't like it.'

From the response of *Interviewee 2* above, as using the NPE by two educated Nigerians brings them closer, using the standardised English estranges them.

The interview with *Interviewee 2* continued:

Interviewer: You talked about English, is the pidgin not English?

Interviewee 2: It is English too that is why it is called pidgin English?

Interviewer: So why do you differentiate between them?

Interviewee 2: Pidgin is simple and understood by most people.

In this continuation of interview shown above, the fifth sociolinguistic motivation for the use of NPE is revealed. It is intelligibility because the NPE is generally understood due to its simplicity in lexis and structure.

The interview with interviewees 4 and 5 elaborate on the simplicity and wide spread intelligibility of the NPE in Nigeria. *Interviewee 4* reasons that singing in pidgin is in vogue that is why he uses the NPE.

Interviewer: What do you think makes singing in pidgin fashionable?

Interviewee 4: Most Nigerians like it, especially the youth.

Interviewer: Why do you think they like it in pidgin?

Interviewee 4: English does not say it the way they want.

Interviewer: Why not?

Interviewee 4: What I sing in English, when I sing it in pidgin, it sounds sweeter to my fans. Some things are better said in pidgin.

Interviewer: What if you say them in English?

Interviewee 4: I cannot say it well in English as I can say it in pidgin.

The qualities of currency and expressivity which the NPE carry as revealed in *Interviewee 4*'s responses above also constitute the sixth and seventh motivations for using the NPE.

Interviewee 5 advanced the response given by *Interviewee 4*,noting that as the musicians sing in pidgin to satisfy his listeners and expresses himself better, the *Interviewer 5* writes in the NPE to popularise it. For her, writing in NPE is a creative means of using the English. In her response to why she uses the NPE in writing, 'The NPE is unique because Nigerian experiences are unique.' She further responded that, '… although the readership will be limited to Nigerians, it is worth it because Nigerians are her target readers.' This raises the urge for language popularisation and show of language creativity as the eighth and ninth sociolinguistic motivations for using the NPE.

Results for Research Question 2

Acquisition of the NPE has been a source of survival for Nigerians. The responses of *Interviewee 10* shown below explains how she secured her job of TV presentation in NPE:

Interviewer: I like the way you speak pidgin English in your TV presentation.
Interviewee 10: Oh, thank you. But why?
Interviewer: You are fluent.
Interviewee 10: I was given the job because the TV station needed someone who can speak in pidgin. And coincidentally I known how to speak it.
Interviewer: Did you plan for it?
Interviewee 10: I don't understand.
Interviewer: I mean; did you learn the pidgin to get a job?
Interviewee 10: No. but if not because I can speak it, I wouldn't have got this job ….

While *Interviewee 10* uses her competence in the NPE to secure and maintain her job, *Interviewer 6* responded: 'I had to quickly learn the pidgin to sell my things in the East [Igbo-dominated region].' The interview continued:

Interviewer: Why don't you speak the correct English to sell?
Interviewee 7: I don't know [how to speak it].

Interviewer: Why didn't you learn it the way you learnt the pidgin English?
Interviewee 7: Even the buyers don't know [how to speak it].

In this situation where both sellers and buyers haggle in the NPE in order to gain the most out of their resources, the NPE – though considered as language of convenience in this regard, becomes a language for enhancing economic wellbeing of Nigerian. In politics, using the NPE is considered persuasive enough to convince to electorate. Gaining and controlling political power, as noted by *Interviewee 7*, is more effectively conducted in the NPE.

Having confirmed from *Interview 7* that politicians come to solicit for votes using 'small-small English,' the interview continued:
Interviewer: Why not in big-big English?
Interviewee 7: We will not understand.
Interviewer: OK. What will happen if they speak the big-big English?
Interviewee 7: Who will even listen to them?
Interviewer: You mean people will not vote for them?
Interviewee 7: Yes.
Interviewer: Why?
Interviewee 7: If you talk to me in small-small English, I will like you and even be your friend and vote for you.
Interviewer: What do you mean by small-small English?
Interviewee 7: The one that people know even though they have not gone to school.

The conversation above has again confirmed that the NPE is a social equalizer. By using it for persuasive reason, one easily gets closer to the people and obtain their validation to occupy a political position. Nigerian politicians' take advantage of this power social equality carried by the NPE to make better their living conditions.

Discussion

The social context of pidginisation as reported by Hymes (2020) agrees with the sociolinguistic framework within which this

research is conducted, indicating that the NPE is a variation of English, although 'pidgin formation' has been suggested by Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) for more clarity as a replacement for 'pidginisation'. In line with Hudson's (1996) different but related concepts of 'language in society' and 'language in individual', results of the research demonstrate that the society motivates the use of pidgin as much as the way the individual needs influences the pidginisation.

Although it is a trade language as Crystal (1992) reports and gonfirmed by the results, it is also revealed by the results the the NPE is language of politics, signaling frienship and trust between the Nigerian users as noted by Ojo (2020) and Affia (2023). Whether it is language of trade or politics, the results indicate that the NPE is used as language of survival in a multilingual society where English is used as second language. This confirms Affia's (2023) claim that the NPE is the English variation which has the largest number of users, contrary to Brosnahan's (1958) finding that most Nigerians use the mesolectal Nigerian English variation.

Against the background that pidginisation signals lack of education (Holmes, 2013), results of the research have shown that, although lack of education leads to pidginisation, educated speakers also use the NPE to accommodate and show solidarity for the uneducated users. This partly explains why Ehondor (2020) views the NPE as a uniting factor, suggesting that it can stand as the Nigerian national language.

Conclusion

In sociolinguistic terms and as demonstrated in this research, the NPE is distinguished from English not as a mere variation of the English, but as a language possessing the force of integrating the Nigerian multi-speech communities. This way, the NPE is not a disreputable language in several situations. Regardless of one's negative attitude towards it, the need to succeed conditions

Nigerians to use the NPE with style and purpose. As agents of its propagation, the young generation of Nigerians especially in secondary and tertiary institutions find the NPE suitable for their life styles of using the social media, singing and listening to songs, partying, delivering and listening to comedies, staging protest and several others.

While certain forms of English are used to signal accommodation and solidarity, for example, such factors are signaled using the NPE as a whole. By this phenomenon of pidginising the English by Nigerians, it challenges the sociolinguistic theory to consider the NPE entirely as a socially motivated language formed to reflect the diversity of the Nigerian society. Studying it, therefore, requires a deep cross-cultural knowledge to enable the accurate collection and interpretation of the sociolinguistic data.

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