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Pidgin English as a Vehicle for the Promotion of Peaceful Co-Existence and National Unity in Nigeria

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Abstract:

The paper views pidgin as a distinct language, rich, viable and capable of being used for any form of discourse, including the academic. It goes further to examine some definitions of pidgin, its attributes and origin. Furthermore, it examines the impression and attitudes of Nigerians towards Pidgin English. Also, the paper discusses how Pidgin can be used as a vehicle for the promotion of peaceful co-existence and national unity. It enumerates some problems militating against using Pidgin as a vehicle for the promotion of peace and unity, and makes some recommendations towards ameliorating the situation. It concludes by encouraging government at all levels to strengthen Pidgin by way of developing it in order to effectively and actively perform the role of promoting peaceful co-existence and national unity in Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Pidgins are languages not acquired as mother tongues and are used for a restricted set of communicative functions. They are formed from a mixture of languages and have a limited vocabulary and simplified grammar. Pidgins serve as a means of communication between speakers of mutually unintelligible languages and may become essential in a multi-lingual nation like Nigeria.

This paper considers pidgin as a distinct language like any other for being viable, rich and comprehensive and can be used for any form of discourse, including the academic. The paper debunks the notion that pidgin is a 'makeshift' or an 'auxiliary language', which cannot be used for any serious academic discourse.

According to Greenbaum (1996), there are about thirty-five (35) English based pidgins and creoles. English based because they draw heavily on English vocabulary. They are divided into Atlantic and Pacific varieties. Nigerian pidgin English belongs to the Atlantic variety linked to West African languages. It has over the years promoted peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic groups that constitute the geographical entity called Nigeria.

2. Definitions of Pidgins

Elugbe and Omamor (1987) define pidgin as "some kind of a marginal language that arises to fulfill specific communication needs in a well defined circumstance". Todd (1974) defines it as "a language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who

Have no common language" According to Olaoye (1998), "pidgin refers to a number of varieties of speech that have grown out of other languages and are used in other places since the 17th century. It is used for communication between persons having no other language in common".

In view of these definitions, pidgin cannot therefore be regarded as mere jargon or a bastardized, rudimentary or makeshift version of standard language.

3. The Attributes of Pidgin

For a language to be recognized as a pidgin, it must possess the following attributes.

- i. It must have a simplified grammar, that is to say, its grammatical structure should not be complex.
- ii. It must have a reduced vocabulary, which must be a mixture of languages.
- iii. It must not be a mother-tongue to any group of users. In other words, it must have no native speakers. The moment pidgin has native speakers, its status changes to Creole.

4. The Origin of Nigerian English-Based Pidgin

Nigerian English based-pidgin belongs to the Atlantic variety the linked to West African languages. They originated in West Africa and also developed in the Caribbean as a result of the slave trade. Slaves speaking different West African languages were deliberately mixed on the transport ships in the Caribbean plantations to reduce the risk of rebellion.

Olaoye (1998 in Mafeni 1965) says Nigerian English based pidgin is a product of urbanization. According to him, when Africans of different linguistic backgrounds came to live in urban areas, they developed a contact language, which was a mixture of English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and local languages and dialects. Nigerian English based pidgin is equally traced to the initial contact between Africans (Nigerians) and European traders. It could be recalled that Nigerians and European traders who came in contact had no common language of communication. Thus, a contact language (pidgin) had to be developed. It is this contact language that some scholars called a 'trade' or an 'auxiliary' language. In a nutshell, the origin of Nigerian English based-pidgin is traced to the Atlantic slave trade, urbanization and trade contact between Nigerians and the European traders.

5. Attitudes towards Nigerian English-Based Pidgin

Attitudes to Nigerian Pidgin English among Nigerians range from adoration to disdain. Among the most ardent admirers are Elugbe and Omamor, co-authors of Nigerian Pidgin (Heinemann, Ibadan, 1987). The book offers the best linguistic account of Nigerian pidgin to date. However, there are several other Nigerians including linguists, who look at pidgin with disdain. To such Nigerians, pidgin is a bastardized form of English meant for the illiterate masses. Such people do not perceive pidgin as a distinct language but rather a bastardized version of Standard English, which should not be spoken by the educated elite. Therefore, literary artists who belong to this category use pidgin for the depiction of illiterate characters in their literary compositions.

Such negative attitude towards Nigerian Pidgin English displayed by some Nigerians will not help the development of the language. It is high time we recognized Nigerian Pidgin English as a distinct language and work towards its development like any other language.

6. Using Nigerian Pidgin English as a Vehicle for the Promotion of Peaceful Co-existence and National Unity

Nigerian Pidgin English is considered to be one of the indigenous languages, because of its widespread. Among the existing languages in Nigeria today, it has the highest number of speakers (Jibril, 1995). The use of Nigerian Pidgin English is no longer restricted to urban areas across the country. It has become the language of social interaction among Nigerians, of trade and commerce, of literary composition and education, of advertisement and propaganda as well as language of the media.

If pidgin can perform such numerous functions, as enumerated above, it is therefore capable of promoting peaceful co-existence among Nigerians, especially for the following reasons.

Firstly, Nigerian English based-pidgin is a non-native language to any group of Nigerian speakers. One of the threats to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria today is ethno-centrism. Nigerian pidgin English, which has no native speakers, is therefore capable of eliminating ethno-centrism, thereby promoting peaceful co-existence and national unity in Nigeria. Secondly, Nigeria is a multi-lingual country with about 395 major and minor languages (Hansford et al., 1976). Pidgin English has made it possible for people from diverse linguistic backgrounds to relate and interact cordially and peacefully. It therefore promotes harmonious and peaceful co-existence among Nigerians. Thirdly, trade and commerce are the traditional functions of pidgin; of course, it is often described as a trade or contact language. Nigerian English based pidgin promotes and facilitates trading activities among people of Nigeria from diverse linguistic backgrounds and cultures, especially among the masses that goes a long way to promote mutual understanding, peace and unity.

Fourthly it promotes inter-tribal marriages among the people of Nigeria from different ethnic backgrounds. Today, Igbo and Yoruba, Hausa and Ibibio, Igala and Idoma have gainfully married and live peacefully with one another through the use of common language which is Pidgin English. Such inter-tribal marriages, which are made possible by Pidgin English have therefore promoted peace and unity among various tribes of Nigeria, thereby reducing inter-ethnic rivalries and crises.

Furthermore, Nigerian English based-pidgin is being used as a medium of literary composition and expression in preaching peace and unity by literary and musical artists, for example, the composition of various high life music by artists likes Fela Anikulapo, Dennis Osadebay, Nico Mbaga among others. Also, the literary composition of Ken Sarowiwa's poem entitled: "Dis Nigeria Sef" used Pidgin English as a medium of expression in preaching peace and unity.

Also, most media organizations from time to time deliberately chose Nigerian pidgin English as a medium of educating, entertaining and preaching of peace and unity. The Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and various state television channels and radio FM stations are good examples of such media organizations. This no doubt goes a long way to promote much needed peace and unity in Nigeria.

7. The Problems Militating against using Pidgin as a Vehicle for the Promotion of Peaceful Co-existence and National Unity

- i. Pidgin is looked down upon by the elite as a language of the down trodden masses, thereby refusing to identify themselves with it. To many elites, pidgin is a language for low profile citizens. This attitude of the elite discourages many average citizens from speaking the language.
- ii. Pidgin has a limited vocabulary and therefore cannot be used for serious academic discourse. This is why some scholars describe it as a marginal, a makeshift or an auxiliary language.
- iii. Since it has no native speakers, people look at it as no-body's language and consider it as a language without roots.
- iv. The language has inadequate literature. The known comprehensive text in the language is the one written by Elugbe, B.C. and Omamor, A.P. entitled: "Nigerian Pidgin (Background and Prospects)" published by Heinemann, Ibadan. Books are

lacking in its phonology, grammar and syntax, semantics, morphology and vocabulary, among others. This in no small measure hinders its development and teaching.

- v. The language is equally bedeviled by lack of teachers and instructional facilities. This, in fact, hinders its growth and development. Many Nigerians are only proficient in the oral aspect of the language, but cannot write it.
- vi. Many Nigerians including leaders do not recognize the unifying role of Nigerian Pidgin English. Unconsciously and unrecognizingly, it is playing the role of lingua franca. Many ethnic groups today tend to understand themselves and live peacefully with one another because of the common language they have, which is pidgin.

8. Recommendations

- i. The Nigerian elite should stop looking down on pidgin as a debased or bastardized form of English meant for the illiterate masses. They should perceive it as a distinct language like any other.
- ii. Linguists and scholars should be commissioned to write standard textbooks on pidgin to enhance its development.
- iii. Since pidgin is spoken by all and sundry in the country, it should be made as a lingua franca in place of the non-availability of an indigenous lingua franca.
- iv. Teachers should be trained in the language to enhance its teaching and learning at various levels.
- v. Resources and facilities for its teaching and learning should be made available by the government and the well to do individuals in the society.
- vi. Its unifying role should be recognized, encouraged and be strengthened by the government.

9. Conclusion

Pidgin is the singular language that may have the highest number of speakers in Nigeria today. A language with such a number of speakers should not be looked down upon. Its role in promoting peaceful co-existence, harmonious relationship and national unity is enormous and cannot be underrated or overlooked. Government at all levels needs to develop, strengthen and empower this language in order to effectively and adequately discharge its role towards achieving much needed peace, which seems to be eluding the Nigerian nation in recent time.

10. References

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