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## Variety Differentiation in Nigerian Pidgin: A Sociolinguistic Study

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### **Abstract:**

*Language contact often leads to the development of unique linguistic forms, and Pidgin is one such result in the field of sociolinguistics. It arises out of necessity and acts as a bridge to meet the socio-economic needs of diverse communities speaking different languages. While scholarly discussions usually focus on the structure and origins of Pidgin, this paper shifts attention to uncovering the existing variations, particularly within Nigerian Pidgin. However, distinguishing these varieties presents significant challenges due to sociolinguistic complexities. Nigerian Pidgin, with English as its main influence and Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba as contributing languages, presents an interesting linguistic landscape. Despite urban areas being mainly inhabited by the same ethnic groups, subtle yet noticeable variations exist within Nigerian Pidgin. These nuances, although seemingly subtle, require thorough exploration because of their sociolinguistic nature. This research seeks to explore the intricate mix of differences found within Nigerian Pidgin. It aims to uncover and understand the social and language-related reasons behind why this language has such diverse variations. By navigating through this linguistic mosaic, the goal is to reveal the subtle yet significant distinctions that characterize the diverse variations of Nigerian Pidgin across communities and regions.*

**Keywords:** Nigerian pidgin, sociolinguistics, linguistic landscape, variations

### **1. Introduction**

Human language is remarkably versatile, enabling effective communication in different situations. Sociolinguistics dives into how these language skills interact with societal barriers. Pidgin, a distinctive language form, emerges to help people communicate when they come from diverse language backgrounds and need to interact socially, economically, or politically within a community. Agbedo (2011) suggests that before the Tower of Babel story (Gen. 2:2), the world had a single language. After this event, it became multilingual, resulting in over 6,000 languages today, with around 70% concentrated in just 20 nations, leading to widespread use of multiple languages. People tend to strongly hold onto their native languages in multilingual societies due to their cultural ties. Adekunle (1990) identifies this attachment to ethnic languages as a force pulling communities apart, hindering national unity. However, it also drives the need for interaction within diverse societies, leading to the adoption of a "common language" (lingua franca) for communication. This simplified language, much like an "Esperanto," is what is commonly known as pidgin.

#### *1.1. Contact Linguistics*

Pidgin cannot be discussed outside the framework of contact linguistics. Weinreich (1953) laid the groundwork for the study of the ways in which contact between/among languages has the power to change them. He highlighted the possibility of external sources for language change; in other words, external languages in contact with a given language can bring about change. This postulation can fairly be said to have launched the field of contact linguistics. Whinnom (1971), in agreement with this reasoning, suggests that pidginization can only occur when three or more languages come in contact. According to him, Pidgin and Creole are "... contact languages per excellence..." Recent studies now place pidgin within the framework of contact linguistics (Thomason, 2001, Winford, 2003, Migge, 2003, Holn, 2004). It is important to note that with increased scholarly attention to the study of pidgins, the question of how theories of language relate to it has been raised. The Chomskyan tradition of naturalism and generativism would inquire how the theory of language acquisitions could relate to the emergence of pidgins, while the Weinreich tradition would make such inquiries from the perspective of language contact.

#### *1.2. Pidgin*

Pidgin has been defined severally by several scholars. Ndimele (2008, p.63) sees it as ...a form of language arising from the need for communication among speakers of mutually unintelligible languages and which is characterized by highly simplified structures in both phonology and syntax. In the opinion of Baker (1993 p.6), a pidgin is a form of

language created by members of two or more linguistic groups in contact as a means of inter-communication, the most basic grammatical rules of which are common to all its habitual users regardless of their own primary language... Again, Hall (1972) defines pidgin language as "one whose structure and lexicon have been drastically reduced and which is native to none of those who use it". The common feature of all definitions of pidgin is that it is a simplified language form with reduced structure and straightforward grammatical rules. Its vocabulary is marginal, and it has no native speakers. It is a mixed second language made up of bits and pieces of two or more languages in contact. Furthermore, pidgins are created out of necessity. All situations of language contact, whether migration, labour mobility, slavery, urbanization, trade, etc, can give rise to a pidgin language. Once a cosmopolitan population is formed within a community, the socio-economic needs of such a community require mutual cooperation and understanding. Therefore, the community creates a common language (pidgin) from their different native languages to satisfy their socio-economic needs.

### 1.3. Creole

Creole is a nativized pidgin. When a pidgin-speaking community adopts the pidgin language as its native language such that children born into the community now acquire it as their mother tongue, the pidgin becomes creolized. Therefore, Creole is an advanced pidgin with improved structure, more regular grammatical rules, wider vocabulary and, most importantly, recognized native speakers. Modern linguistics within the Chomskyan paradigm lays emphasis on how individual languages tap from the universal principles that underlie human language (The principles and parameters theory) and tries to understand the nature of language acquisition. Particularly, it seeks to understand how children acquire 1st language (L1). Since pidgin differs from Creole mainly on the basis of non-possession of native speakers while Creole has native speakers (children acquire it as L1), modern linguistics pays far more attention to Creole than pidgin. In some cases, pidgin and Creole were used interchangeably. All the same, the emergence of Creole from pidgin has been referred to as the "life cycle model" (Meijer & Muysken 1977 p.30). Creole begins its life cycle from pidgin, a medium of communication among people who lack a language in common. Upon nativization, i.e. when it becomes the first language of children born in the community, the pidgin undergoes morphosyntactic expansion and becomes more regularized. Thus, a Creole is born.

### 1.4. Pidgin-Jargon Terminology

Simply put, jargon is a professional language. Members of specific trades or professions use specialized terms to refer to the technicalities of their profession. However, jargon remains an informal language. Our mention of jargon here is meant to draw attention to the position of some scholars that jargon is a kind of pidgin. We had seen pidgin earlier as an irregular, near chaotic speech variety inadequate for full communication. However, Muhlhauser (1997) breaks this language form into jargon, stable pidgin and expanded pidgin. Even Bakker in Kouwenberg and Singler (2008) distinguishes between jargon, pidgin, and pidgin-creole. Their treatment of these terms seems to suggest a line of progression in terms of Morphosyntactic expansion from jargon through pidgins to Creole ultimately. However, Creole remains the ultimate nativized language variety.

### 1.5. The Genealogy of Pidgin

There are two broad theoretical possibilities of pidgin origin, viz: the monogenetic theory and the polygenetic theory:

#### 1.5.1. Monogenetic Theory

This school of thought holds that all pidgins are historically descended from a single (mono) source. It is believed that Sabir (the common European language used in the Middle Ages) was the mother of all pidgins from where Portuguese Colonialists spread it across Europe and Africa. Schiffman (1999) gives an account of a process called relexification, i.e. the process of replacing the vocabulary of a language with new ones from another language. This process seems to re-echo Wardhaugh (1986), who posits that Sabir was relexified by the Portuguese with their language, which they used for their commercial endeavours around the European and African world. Thus, it is believed that all European-based pidgins sprang from Portuguese. The import of the Monogenetic theory of origin is that all European-based pidgins had Portuguese vocabulary originally but, over time, were relexified with new vocabulary from other languages or with later standard "Loans" from the same language.

#### 1.5.2. Polygenetic Theory

This theory holds that there are various separate sources of origin of pidgins. According to this postulation, structural similarities among pidgins arise because of linguistic universals and, perhaps, due to their emergence. A popular polygenetic postulation is the baby talk theory. This theory has two arguments in its favour. First, children only imitated the standard pronunciation, just like pidgin speakers and used more content words than function words. Secondly, slave masters tried to imitate the speech of the slaves, and over time, the incorrect imitation became an easier means of communication among them.

#### 1.5.3. Other Sub-theories

It is necessary to mention a few other theories of the origin of pidgins just to acknowledge them, as this may not be necessary for this presentation. The Universalist hypothesis holds that it does not matter whether the origin is monogenetic or polygenetic. What matters is that the donor language is stripped bare (completely relexified) and built up

again according to the principles of linguistic universals. The parallel development theory posits that pidgin languages emerge independently and develop along parallel lines. Finally, the nautical jargon theory relates pidgin development to the nautical community, where crew members spoke different native languages. Out of necessity, pidgin is built around common nautical jargon with bits of crew members' different native languages.

## 2. Pidgin Structure

Two levels of language interaction are noticed in pidgins. The first level contains the donor or lexifier language, often referred to as the superstrate. Thus, Portuguese is the superstrate of most European-based pidgins. In Nigeria, English forms the superstrate language. The next level is made up of the various different native languages that make up the pidgin. These are called the substrates. The grammatical pattern of pidgins is based on the substrates. Generally, pidgins have a very simple structure, as simple as can be. They have a mixed and limited vocabulary, reduced grammatical structure, no gender, no plural, no agreement, deviant grammatical rules, marked with aspect instead of tense, with particles instead of affixation. In fact, pidgins are incomplete languages.

### 2.1. Nigerian Pidgin

The origin of the Nigerian pidgin can be traced to the colonial period of Nigerian history. The European colonialists who came for socio-economic and religious reasons needed a mutually intelligible medium of communication with the natives who did not understand the English language and who spoke widely unrelated native languages. It, therefore, became necessary that Lingua Franca be sought. Through the natives' mispronunciation of English words and the English colonialists' mutilation of the native languages, the Nigerian pidgin was born. Nigerian pidgin, at its early stage, was concentrated in the urban cities, especially the coastal cities that received the white colonialists first. Thus, Lagos, Warri, Port-Harcourt, etc, were the first cities where the Nigerian pidgin developed. As a result of the nature of Nigerian official language policy, which recognized Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba as major languages, Nigerian pidgin English thus has these three languages as its major substrates, with English providing the base or superstrate language. Hence, it is commonly called pidgin English (or broken English, probably because of the seemingly "broken" grammatical structure). However, some vocabulary from several other ethnic languages has been equally injected into the Nigerian pidgin over the years because of heavy rural/urban migration. Most of the urban cities now are heavily cosmopolitan, with speakers of several other native languages of Nigeria living in them and contributing to the mixture in the Nigerian pidgin vocabulary. The Nigerian Pidgin is widely spoken in Nigeria, especially in urban cities, as a Lingua Franca even though it has not been granted an official status. Nigerian pidgin cannot be called a Creole yet because it has no native speakers. However, it has been observed that children in some Nigerian cities like Warri, Port-Harcourt, Benin, etc, acquire it quite early. Ihemere (2006) reports that it is the native language of approximately 3-5 million Nigerians and the second language of over 75 million. If this number of speakers is true, then the Nigerian pidgin is at an advanced stage of depidginization (or creolization).

### 2.2. Variations in Nigerian Pidgin

Noticeably, variant forms of the Nigerian pidgin can be noticed from one region of the country to another. These variations arise because of the dominance of particular native languages in the vocabulary of the Nigerian pidgin spoken in corresponding particular regions. However, Ndimele (2008) identifies a standard variety of the Nigerian pidgin, which has the three major languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) as its substrates. This is evident in the loanwords found in the pidgin that are borrowed from these three languages, viz:

Item	Source	Gloss
Oga	Oga	master/boss
Ashawo	Ashewo	prostitute
Dada	Dada	dreadlocked hair
Agbada	Agbada	flowing gown /garment
Jaguda	Jaguda	thief/ruffian
Shaa	Sha	enclitic/rhetorical flourish
Amebo	Amebo	Gossip

Table 1: Nigerian Pidgin Words of Yoruba Origin

Item	Source	Gloss
Wayo	Wayo	deceit
Wahala	Wahala	trouble
Bonanza	Bonanza	useless
Rikishi	Rikishi	conspiracy
Jara	Jara	extra/addition

Table 2: Nigerian Pidgin Words of Hausa Origin

Item	Source	Gloss
Potopoto	Potopoto	mud/miry soil
Ngwa	Ngwa	okay
Wuruwuru	Wuruwuru	deceit
Okongwu	Okongwu	Old person

*Table 3: Nigerian Pidgin Words of Igbo Origin  
(Tables Adapted from Ndimele 2008 pp.70-71)*

These borrowed lexical items from the three major substrates are lumped together into the superstrate's (English) grammatical structure to produce a marginal and reduced form called Nigerian pidgin English. While the three major Nigerian native languages contribute their vocabulary, the donor language contributes both vocabulary and marginal grammatical rules and the other native languages contribute little vocabulary and heavy accents. Perhaps accent and other suprasegmental features are the reasons for the noticeable variations in the Nigerian pidgin. Thus, the variety spoken in Lagos is different from that of Port-Harcourt, and neither is the same as that of Warri. These variations conform to type because, in the literature, variation is not recognized as internal language but as "dialect mixing" (Alleyne, 1971). It is even the absence of variation in standard forms that is considered deviant (Milroy & Milroy, 1999). Thus, the noted standard variety of the Nigerian pidgin does not subsume the existence of other varieties noticed from city to city. Though variations in non-standard forms seem to be favored in the literature (Mufwene, 2001, Muhlhausler, 1997, Labov, 1990, Bickerton, 1986, Whinnom, 1971), the problem of differentiating these varieties has remained unsolved.

### 3. Problems of Variety Differentiation

Reasoning with Alleyne (1971), the variations noticed in pidgins are neither internal nor present in the vernacular varieties, irrespective of language contact. This means that such variations are caused by external social factors. However, these social factors may overlap between varieties of language, thereby creating a major pitfall for variety differentiation.

#### 3.1. Homogeneous Population

Most Nigerian cities that use the pidgin have similar components in their population. Speakers of the noted three "major" native languages are found in all the cities. Therefore, an equal degree of lexification occurs almost simultaneously in the cities such that what is spoken in one city resembles what is spoken in another. Such homogeneous language forms may not be easily differentiated.

#### 3.2. Pidgin Structure

Pidgins are noted to be marginal languages with drastically reduced structure, limited vocabulary, irregular grammatical rules and nobody's native language. A language with the above features is actually in a very sorry state. The structure described here is common to all pidgins, including the Nigerian pidgin. It is, therefore, difficult to differentiate the varieties of a pidgin language, such as Nigerian pidgin.

#### 3.3. Non-existent Literary Tradition

The Nigerian pidgin has no literary tradition and no standard orthography. Variations in language are more easily identifiable in the writing conventions. However, some junk news magazines in Nigeria have published journals in the Nigerian pidgin; even some radio houses have broadcast periods in the Nigerian pidgin. However, these do not reveal the variations that exist in the Nigerian pidgin.

#### 3.4. Lack of Cultural Base

Culture is generally defined as the totality of a people's way of life. This means that language is a major cultural indicator because a people's way of life cannot exclude their language. Language reveals the cultural identity of its speakers. The problem with pidgin here is that it cannot be identified with a particular culture. Language as a vehicle for cultural transmission carries people's cultural realities, their flora and fauna, etc., in certain specialized aspects of language such as imageries, metaphors, proverbs, and idioms. These are not possible with pidgin because it has no culture to showcase. Any aspect of language culture found in the Nigerian pidgin will be chaotic because it will be a mixture of both the superstrate and substrate languages.

#### 3.5. Negative Societal Attitude

In consonance with the postulations of linguistic relativism (or Sapir/ Whorf hypothesis), societal attitude towards a language affects the sociolinguistic status of the language. Generally, pidgin is viewed in Nigeria as a low-class language that is reserved for illiterates and half-baked members of the society. The marginal nature of the language seems to justify this negative attitude. Hymes (1971 p.3) observes that scholarly attention to pidgin was very marginal within the first and second halves of the 20th century. This poor attitude towards pidgin, both in Nigeria and elsewhere, affected its development and possible standardization. As a result, the various varieties of pidgin found in various urban cities in Nigeria remained homogenous and difficult to differentiate.

### 3.6. Diglossia

Kouwenberg and Singler (2008) explain diglossia as a linguistic situation within a language culture where two varieties of the same language are used by the speakers. One variety is given an elevated status over the other. In Nigeria, pidgin English is generally seen as a lower variety of English language existing side by side with the standard variety. It is common to see an individual speak both varieties to different people. The choice of which variety to speak to a particular individual reveals the speaker's attitude towards the addressee. The point here is that in situations of diglossia, the lower language variety is often neglected. Thus, variations within it are not noticed.

### 3.7. Sociolinguistic Variables

Variation is a part of language behaviour. No two speakers of a language speak alike. Individual idiosyncrasies arising from variables such as sex, age, emotion, etc., are part of human language behaviour, which also manifests in pidgin languages. For the Nigerian pidgin, these individual variations overlap with regional variations because speakers of equal status who share similar native language backgrounds are found in all the regions. The result is that ideolectal variations parallel regional variations in the Nigerian pidgin.

## 4. Summary and Conclusion

Like every other pidgin language, the Nigerian pidgin is a marginal language with broken syntax and reduced structure. It exists mainly in oral form and has no native speakers. It is an incidental language created out of necessity. Its substrates are mainly the three acclaimed major languages of Nigeria, namely Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, with negligible inputs in terms of vocabulary and prosody from other coastal languages (often called minority languages). Its superstrate is the English Language. The Nigerian pidgin English originated from contact between the European colonial masters and the coastal cities. It further developed on the threshold of urbanization and rural-urban migrations within the cities triggered by socio-economic reasons. Variations in the Nigerian pidgin manifest as individual idiosyncrasies noticed on the regional divide across the country. However, differentiating the various regional varieties is inhibited by structural, cultural and sociolinguistic factors. Bayley (2002) notes that some of the alternation factors remain random. Due to the fact that Nigerian pidgin English has become the lingua franca among all classes of people across the urban cities in Nigeria, it has become necessary that more serious attention be paid to it. Since the Mona Conference of 1959 (Le Page, 1961), there has been increased scholarly attention to pidgins, and they have been recognized as speech systems. Notwithstanding its marginal nature, the Nigerian pidgin is bridging ample communication gap for the class-stratified Nigerian society. It has even become the language of music, popularly called "Naija vibes". Its status is presently elevated in Nigerian universities (among the students). This emerging change in attitude towards the "Broken English" calls for the attention of the national language planners. Considering the number of speakers, we agree with Igboanusi (2008) that Nigerian pidgin English should be accepted as one of the major languages of Nigeria and should be given an official status.

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