



Decreolization of Nigerian Pidgin amongst Students of Tertiary Institutions in Kebbi State

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Abstract:

This study focused on decreolization of Nigerian Pidgin as spoken by students in tertiary institutions in Kebbi State. The main objective was to identify indices of decreolization in the pidgin spoken amongst students seeing as Nigerian Pidgin coexists with its major lexifier, English. Through participants observation, research assistants participated in and recorded natural conversations amongst students in Federal University, Birnin Kebbi and Waziri Umaru Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi. Lexical and Syntactic levels of the data collected were transcribed, and features of decreolization derived from the transcribed speeches were identified and analyzed. The results of the research indicated a preference by students to use Standard English pronouns, number and case markings, as well as to-infinitives in place of serialized verbs in their pidgin expressions. These are departures from the unique features of Nigerian Pidgin. This research thus concluded that Nigerian Pidgin is in the process of being decreolized as is to be expected seeing as English is Nigeria's official language and the language that defines social class.

Key words: *decreolization, Nigerian Pidgin, indigenous languages, English language*

I. INTRODUCTION

Decreolization, a process where an established pidgin language gradually begins to navigate towards its superstrate language in terms of its structural and lexical form, is a common phenomenon amongst pidgins in the world that coexist with their lexifiers. Nigerian Pidgin, henceforth NP, which is a product of English language and the various indigenous languages, has had to coexist with English—the official language of the country.

Over the years, NP has become a lingua franca for many and a solution to communication problems amongst speakers of Nigeria's numerous languages. The growth of towns with their heterogeneous populations—mostly due to established unity schools and tertiary institutions, trade, government agencies, etc., can be said to be a major factor that enhanced the use and spread of NP. (Gani-Ikilama, 2005:51; Elugbe and Omamor, 1991:15). NP has undergone a process of development from a mere makeshift language accompanied by lots of gestures and mime into a well-established or expanded language with a well-developed and describable grammar. The vocabulary too, like the vocabulary of any living language in active use, keeps expanding mainly through borrowing from other languages.

Outside the classrooms, the most common language spoken amongst Nigerian students is NP as tertiary institutions in the country are melting pots for young adults from various parts of the country. Rather than speak English which is the official language, students prefer NP as a social and more relaxed language which captures their whims and caprices.

However, in spite of its popularity amongst Nigerians, and especially amongst Nigerian students in the tertiary institutions, NP is perhaps the most neglected language in Nigeria (Deuber 2005) as it neither has official role nor official recognition by the government. NP has had to cope with neglect while seeking to maintain its uniqueness as a link language among Nigeria's teeming millions, with a multi-linguistic background of more than five hundred languages.

II. JUSTIFICATION

A number of research works have been carried out on NP, prominent amongst which are Akinluyi (1977), Gani-Ikilama (1989), and Elugbe and Omamor (1991). These researchers have argued in favour of the existence of NP, describing it as a language "in its own rights, and not merely a kind of English" (Gani-Ikilama, 2005:52). They argue that NP is unintelligible to native speakers of English who have never had contact with it. NP "is markedly different phonologically, syntactically, and even in semantics from English in spite of its heavy dependence on the latter for vocabulary elements" (*ibid*). More recent researches such as Onyeché (2004), Afolayan (2015) and Uwaechia (2016) discuss the uniqueness of NP as a distinct variety of pidgin, differentiating it from West African Pidgin English (WAPE) and/or other world pidgins. They also emphasize the widespread use of NP across the nation as well as its acceptance amongst various social strata.

Seeing as tertiary institutions around Nigeria are made up of students from various tribes and indigenous languages, there is no doubt that NP is a common language spoken by students. The problem though, is that NP as spoken in tertiary institutions may be experiencing more or the same level of decreolization or, at least, some measure of decreolization as may be observed in nonacademic environments. This is no less so in the tertiary institutions located in Kebbi as students are admitted into those institutions from various parts of the country. This means that the academic community in Kebbi, as in other parts of the nation, can be said to be a conglomeration of indigenous languages existing in the same linguistic space as English language—a basis for the rise of a pidgin, but even more so, the grounds for the decreolization of the same.

While a few research works have been done on the decreolization of NP, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none has been done to ascertain the extent of decreolization of NP in any tertiary institution or if there is any decreolization at all. Thus, a linguistic study that does not only support the view that there is a NP which is unique in itself, but also looks at the tendency of this pidgin, as spoken within tertiary institutions, to become decreolized is needful. It is in the light of this that this study investigates the use of NP amongst students in tertiary institutions in Kebbi in order to examine the level of influence that Standard English has had on NP, and to what extent it can be said that NP is decreolized or in the process of being decreolized.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Does NP, as spoken in tertiary institutions, still maintain its uniqueness?
2. Is NP spoken in tertiary institutions a decreolizing variety?
3. What lexical and syntactic features indicate decreolization in NP as spoken in tertiary institutions.

IV. OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to analyze pidgin expressions as used amongst students of some selected tertiary institutions in Kebbi State in order to ascertain the extent to which NP is decreolized or is being decreolized. Thus, the specific objectives of the study include the following:

- (1) To determine whether or not NP still maintains its uniqueness as a pidgin in light of its relationship with Standard English in tertiary institutions.
- (2) To determine whether or not the pidgin used amongst students of tertiary institutions in Kebbi is the "Standard" NP or a decreolizing variety.
- (3) To identify lexical and syntactic features used in the pidgin spoken amongst Nigerian students as NP expressions but which have been influenced by the English language.

V. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Since the pioneering work of Decamp (1971), the concept of decreolization has remained an "insecure" (Patrick 1999:19) subject of ongoing debate so that one group of linguists, such as Decamp (1971), Labov (1971), and Holm (2004) sees decreolization as a result of the coexistence of a subordinate language with a superordinate one such that "linguistic forms produced by a speaker of the subordinate [language] in a formal context will shift in an unsystematic manner towards the superordinate" Labov (1971:450). Thus, the change in the language form is attributed to social motivation for creole speakers to acquire the standard language. Another group of scholars, on the other hand, claims that the idea that decreolization arises due to pressure to acquire the standard language is flawed given that speakers of creoles do not necessarily suffer identity problems. Bickerton (1980:124) is of the view that "[decreolization] is first and foremost a linguistic and not a social phenomenon." Parkvall (2006) cited in Lipski (2011:277) further argues that:

The incorporation of foreign linguistic material into one's own speech is not necessarily motivated by an urge to shift one's ethnic belonging[...] plenty of ordinary mortals are less reflective about identity issues, and simply pick up bits and pieces of surrounding speech habits in a not always conscious fashion.

This present research, considers both sides of the argument valid and not necessarily mutually exclusive especially when NP and the speakers of NP are at the center of the argument. Whilst it is true that people "simply pick up bits and pieces of surrounding speech habits" (ibid), it is a fact that most Nigerians consider it as civilization when one is proficient in English and has preference for the culture of the Western world. Decreolization of NP can therefore not be devoid of some elements of social pressure even while it is considered a linguistic phenomenon.

Various definitions of decreolization have been given by several scholars; a few are discussed here: Trask (1997) sees decreolization as "the process in which a creole changes so as to become more similar to the natural language from which it was originally derived". Holm (2004:50) describes it as "a creole progressively dropping its nonstandard features and adding standard ones." Rickford (1987:16) says it is "movement away from creole norms and toward the norms of lexically related standard languages." Thomason and Kaufman (1988) cited in Siegel (2010:85) define it as when "the language of a substrate creole speaking population gradually changes through structural and lexical borrowing from the superstrate vocabulary-base language." Elugbe and Omamor (1991:110) say that it "refers to the development of a pidgin to the extent that a certain convergence between it and the base language

becomes observable". Bickerton (1980:110) puts it in clearer terms by saying that "it consists in the creole abandoning, one after another, those features which distinguish it from the superstrate, and immediately replacing each abandoned feature by its superstrate equivalent."

A number of research works have been carried out on the subject of pidginization, creolization and decreolization: Afolayan (2015)'s research on the 'Nigerian-Ness' of Nigerian Pidgin in Selected Literary works focuses on the pidginization process of the NP especially its uniqueness as a pidgin influenced by Nigeria's over 500 indigenous languages. The research identifies the contributions of various Nigerian languages to the vocabulary of the NP, noting that cultural influences from the indigenous languages are important constituents of NP. Afolayan (2015) adds that good chunks of indigenous words that have found their way into NP are from the Yoruba language. Data was collected from two texts by Nigerian authors. The results reveal that indeed, NP is a unique pidgin different from other west African pidgins or any other pidgin for that matter. This reviewed work is related to the present research in that it identifies NP as a unique pidgin which has been creolized in many parts of the nation. This present research is however different in that it further discusses decreolization of this established NP.

In a sociolinguistic study on the use of NP for business transactions, Uwaechia (2016) investigates the extent to which buyers and sellers make use of NP with a blend of other indigenous languages, especially Hausa in Samaru and Sabon Gari markets of Zaria, Kaduna state. The study investigates the significant impact of switching and mixing codes (indigenous languages and NP) for the purpose of business interactions in the selected markets. Methods used to collect data were audio-tape recording and questionnaire. Ten (10) transaction sessions were recorded and four hundred and sixty-eight (468) copies of the questionnaire were administered to the buyers and sellers in both markets through direct contact. The findings show that NP plays a significant role in trading, and although it is often code mixed or switched with Hausa in the area studied, it is still the predominant language spoken in the markets. Uwaechia (2016) thus concludes that NP is a distinct pidgin that borrows heavily from the indigenous language(s) of its users. The present study agrees with this in terms of the popularity and widespread usage of NP, as well as the ability of users of NP, like any other pidgin, to enrich the vocabulary by adopting lexical items and/or expressions from the substrate language. While this is similar to the present study in terms of the popularity and spread, it is different in that it seeks to study the navigation of NP towards its lexifier (the English language) and not the substrate languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and the likes.

Ugwu (2021)'s recent study on decreolizing the NP addresses issues concerning creoles especially in Nigerian context—issues such as the stigma that surrounds creoles in Nigeria among the elites in contrast to the benefits among its users. The work further delves into the origin, and historical evolution of the NP. The data collected was analyzed using the concept of descriptive method analysis with minor modifications and additional translations in order to understand the actual meaning of words. The theoretical framework used is the common socio-context theory which is concerned with the language situation in society. The work also focuses on prospects of "decreolizing the creole" as used in various sectors such as entertainment and religion. The findings reveal the extent to which NP has been nativized in certain regions giving rise to such creoles as *Barikanci* spoken in military barracks, especially those in the north. On the surface, this reviewed work seems to share a lot of similarities with the present research—and they do—in that they both emphasize the existence and uniqueness of NP; however, they are different in the concept of the word "decreolization". While the former considers nativisation of NP to be decreolization, this present research focuses on decreolization of the NP as a result of its navigation towards the lexifier, which in this case is English. More so, the present research uses a primary source of data (students of higher institutions) as opposed to a secondary source of data used by the former.

Nwachukwu (2017) examines the diglossic situation that exists in the NP and NC, depicting what happens when languages are created and recreated as they come in contact. Using Uriel Weinreich's theoretical postulations of Prestige and Counter-Prestige the research reveals that diglossic situations exist in the NC lectal levels as well as the NP against its lexifier, English so that although NP has come to be in Nigeria, having risen from simply being a contact language into an established and expanded pidgin and creole in certain parts of the nation, it is still faced with the issue of acceptance amongst the elite and the government as a language capable of serving as a national language. It is the position of the study that one can premise this bias towards NP and NC on the confusion that springs up from the inability of many to differentiate between NP and Broken English. It is on this premise that NP is situated in the context of diglossia, as a Less Valued (L) variety, as comparable with the English language which is the Highly Valued (H) variety. The present research is similar to the reviewed work in that the same theoretical framework is used. However, while the reviewed work focuses on the attitude of the speakers of pidgin to the language, thus a sociolinguistic study, the present research focuses on such linguistic features that are indices to a change in NP towards the English language.

From the reviewed related studies, it is clear that much has been done on the subject of NP, especially on its pidginization and creolization. However, very little has been done on the issue of the decreolization of the NP. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only the research conducted by Ugwu (2021) focuses on decreolization of NP; even then, it discusses the effect of the substrate languages on the pidgin and not the effect of the lexifier, English on NP, which is what the present research is centered on. Therefore this present study identifies a gap in this area of the study of pidgins, creoles and decreolization in the Nigerian context, and sees the need to investigate the process and extent to which the NP has been decreolized or is in the process of being decreolized.

VI. METHODOLOGY

Data for this research work was sourced through participant observation. Audio recordings of random natural conversations amongst students in Federal University Birnin Kebbi and Waziri Umar Federal Polytechnic, Birnin Kebbi were captured using Samsung voice recorder app. This method helped to eliminate observer's paradox and allowed respondents to speak naturally.

Sections of the recordings that contained NP expressions were then isolated and transcribed. Using the parameters of lexical and syntactic features such as tense, number and possessive case, the isolated NP expressions were further examined in order to identify expressions that point to decreolization. Finally, using Weinreich's theory of Prestige and Counter Prestige, the isolated expressions were then compared to English and "standard" NP in order to show how they indicate decreolization of NP.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

	Pidgin expressions	Standard NP	Meaning	Analysis
1.	Na thieves those pipo be.	Na tif those pipo dem be.	Those people are thieves.	Plurality in NP is indicated by adding the plural marker dem to the noun. The respondents here use the English plural form of the noun, thief – thieves instead of the NP form.
2.	Omo, all the girls just dey fine any how today.	Omo, all the girl dem just dey fine any how today	Boy! All the girls are looking beautiful today.	The plural marker s is used to indicate plurality as against the use of dem .
3.	Na her dey run tins around here	Na am/in dey run tins fo here	She controls things around here	Use of English objective case pronoun her in place of am . Neglect of the NP mutable pronoun fo for English pronoun around
4.	Abeg, tell Abu to come class ; lecture wan start.	Abeg, tell Abu make im come class; lecture wan start.	Please tell Abu to come to the class; the lecture is about to begin.	Use of to + infinitive in place of verb serialization.
5.	A don tell her to leave that yeye guy jare.	A don tell am make im leave that yeye guy jare.	I have told her to leave that useless guy.	Use of English objective case pronoun her in place of NP am indicates gender marking. Use of to + infinitive in verb phrase instead of NP verb
6.	Come make eat.	Come make we chop/chao	Come, let's eat	Use of English word eat in place of a more appropriate NP word, chop
7.	A don explain this thing a hundred times today	A don explain this thing wan hundred time today	I've explained this thing a hundred times today.	Use of English article a to indicate singularity as against the use of NP wan or context to indicate singularity.
8.	He don shit for him troza	I don shit for in troza.	He has embarrassed himself.	Use of English third person singular pronouns he and him in subjective and possessive case respectively, instead of NP i and in is indicative of gender and case marking.
9.	As she dey talk like that so, she don cap you be dat o!	As i dey talk like that so, i don cap you be dat o!	It looks like she has deceived you, from the way she is talking.	Use of third person singular she instead of NP i is indicative of gender marking.
10.	Na only herself Mercy sabi fa.	Na only inself Mercy sabi fa.	Mercy only cares about herself.	Indication of gender marking: use of herself instead of inself is indicative of gender

VIII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research has shown that NP, like any other language, is experiencing transformations through the introduction of features or loss of features that make it a unique pidgin language. This research has identified two major and distinct linguistic levels in NP where decreolization is evident namely; lexical and syntactic levels.

On the lexical level, analysis of data sourced shows that speakers of NP in tertiary institutions seem to now have a preference for using Standard English words where there are actual NP alternatives. This extensive borrowing from Standard English is not limited to content words as in the use of **eat** for **chop**, but also function words, especially the use of other prepositions such as **around** instead of the mutable NP pronoun **fo**.

On the syntactic level, number marking in nouns, gender and case marking in pronouns as well as use of **to + infinitive** in place of serial verb constructions were identified as indices of decreolization from the data sourced.

Number marking in nouns: In NP, the independent plural marker **dem** is usually placed after the noun to indicate plurality. This means that the structure of NP plural noun is **N+dem** unlike the English language where the plural marker is attached to the base.

Also, singularity in NP is realized by placing the numeral **wan** before a noun or by simply leaving the noun without any number or article unlike Standard English where the articles *a* or *an* are used to identify singular nouns. The use of number markings were observed in the NP spoken amongst the students as seen in 1, 2 and 7 respectively.

Number, gender and case marking in pronouns: The standard form of NP pronoun as outlined by Elugbe and Omamor (1991) are as follows:

Subject		Object		Possessive	
a	“I”	mi	“me”	mai	“my/mine”
yu	“you (sg)”	yu	“you”	yɔ	“your (sg.)”
i	“he/she/it”	am	“him/her/it”	in	“his/hers/its”
wi	“we”	wi/ɔs	“us”	wi/awa	“our/ours”
una	“you (pl)”	una	“you”	una	“your/yours”
dɛm	“they”	dɛm	“them”	dɛm	“their/theirs”

It was observed that respondents seemed to use more of Standard English pronouns than NP as seen in 5, 8, 9 and 10.

Serial verb constructions: It is a common feature in standard NP to use verb serialization such that the verb phrase contains two or more verbs without overt markers of coordination/subordination or the need to use **to + infinitive**. Verbs in serialized verb constructions usually share the same sentential subject, which precedes the first verb in the series and is not repeated thereafter such that each of the verbs can take its own object(s), eg. *I cari stick take wound in pikin*. Serializing the verbs this way makes the use of to-infinitives, as in the English language, unnecessary in NP. These research results show a gradual abandoning of verb serialization in preference for to-infinitives.

IX. CONCLUSION

The changing features at the lexical and syntactic levels of NP are clear indications of a gradual gravitation of the NP towards Standard English. Whilst languages generally borrow words from one another, losing certain unique features of a pidgin and replacing same with features of the superstrate language, as in the case of NP and English language, is often the case of decreolization and not mere borrowing. This research therefore concludes that NP is indeed decreolizing and agrees with Aziza (2015) who states that

It is obvious that modern NP... is decreolizing not just in writing as noted by Elugbe and Omamor (1991) but also in speech, at least among speakers who have completed secondary school education. The assimilation of NP through decreolization is to be expected since English is Nigeria's official language and the language of upward social mobility.

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