Aspects of the Syntax of Modern Nigerian Pidgin

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1. Introduction

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) has been classified as an indo-exogenous language (Adegbija 2001) because it is a bridge between English (an exogenous language) and the numerous indigenous languages of Nigeria. It derives the bulk of its vocabulary from English, its superstrate language, while its structure and function are closely affiliated to Nigeria’s indigenous languages, its substrate languages. It is reported to be the most widely spoken language in Nigeria with 3 to 5 million native speakers and more than 75 million second language speakers (Elugbe 1995, Faracas 1996, Egbokhare 2001, en.wikipedia.org). its speakers cut across geographical location, age, educational and socio-economic status, mainly because it is ethnically neutral. It is commonly spoken in cities and urban centers, campuses of tertiary institutions, military and police barracks, bus and taxi stations across the country. As a result, it has many regional and social varieties but its standard variety is spoken in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, particularly in cities like Benin, Sapele, Port-Harcourt and Warri (Faracas 1996 and Egbokhare 2001) where it has creolized and has an identified community of mother tongue speakers (Marchese and Schnukal 1982, Elugbe and Onamor 1991). NP in this region is used for both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communication having permeated domains of language use including the home and the school and has a more elaborated grammatical system than the general NP. It is also fast becoming the language of intergenerational transmission.

This paper focuses on two main issues: first, an analysis of some syntactic features of the NP spoken today in Warri by young educated people aged between 18 and 30 years in order to determine whether what they speak is a general NP or a decreolizing variety. The syntactic features under investigation are: number marking in nouns, number and gender marking in pronouns and the derivation of Yes/No and Wh-questions. This group of NP speakers was chosen because it represents a very vibrant group in any language and a major indicator in determining the state of wellness of a language. A language that is attractive to the young and educated usually has a good chance of survival and its intergenerational capability is assured (Fishman 1991). The second focus of this paper is to examine the sociolinguistic profile of NP with a view to determining its effect on the indigenous languages and on Standard English with which it co-exists as well as its future prospects.

The methodology adopted for data collection was a descriptive survey and the instruments used were a questionnaire and a tape recorder. Data were collected from 120 randomly selected young people all of whom have had at least a secondary school level of education in the English-based medium of education available in Nigeria. Although this is a clear minority of the NP speaking population, it is nonetheless a powerful group in determining the level of influence English has on the morphology/syntax of NP as well as on its use. Twenty sentences on a variety of topics were elicited from each subject and a questionnaire containing twenty questions on language use was also administered to them. Our data would reveal two important facts: first, that modern NP as used by this group of speakers is decreolizing, that is, it is becoming more and more like English in its spoken form (Elugbe 1995: 288) had observed this phenomenon only in the written form of NP). Second, the sociolinguistic profile of NP is rising as it now features in more domains than it hitherto did.

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2. Aspects of Syntax

The syntactic features under investigation are: number marking in nouns, number and gender marking in pronouns and the derivation of Yes/No and Wh-questions.

2.1. Number Marking in Nouns

According to Mafeni (1971:110), “… the grammatical categories of English do not necessarily fit the patterns of Pidgin.” He states further that the derivation of the plural form of a count noun “can only be done by placing the independent plural marker dem after the noun.” This means that the structure of a plural noun is N+dem. (Note that dem is also the word for the third person plural pronoun). (Note: the diphthong [ai] written as ‘ay’ by Mafeni is our ‘ai’). The following are his examples.

1 a. Di drayva dem de kọm
   the driver pl aux. come
   “The drivers are coming”

1b. A no si di ticha dem
   I neg. see the teacher pl.
   “I did not see the teachers”.

However, our data reveals that the plural form of a noun is realised at N+s (+dem). This means that the plural of draiva is either draivases or draivases dem. 70% of our respondents preferred to use only the N+s variant that is similar to English while the others used both variants, that is: N+s and N+s-s+dem interchangeably. The following are some examples:

2 a. Di draivas de kọm / Di draivas dem de kọm
   “The drivers are coming”
   the drivers aux. come / the drivers pl. aux come

b. A no si di tishas / A no si di tishas dem
   I neg. see the teachers / I neg. see the teachers pl.

2c. Wi tẹl awa gads mek dem no it/Wi tẹl awa gads dem mek dem no it
   We tell our guards (pl.) make they neg. eat
   “We told our guards not to eat”

2 d. Tu bọsis don lod go / Tu bọsis dem dem don lod go
   Two buses (pl.) perf. load go
   “Two buses have been loaded and have left”

2 e. Plẹnti shọshis de dis rod / Plẹnti shọshis dem de dis rod
   Plenty churches (pl.) loc. this road
   “There are many churches on this road”

Even the irregular nouns retain their English plural forms and appear with or without the particle dem.

For example:

3 a. Di mẹn de wọk / Di mẹn dem de wọk
   “The men are working”
   the men prog be work

b. Ọl im shidren de abrọd / Ọl im shidren dem de abrọd
   “All his children live overseas”
   All his children loc. abroad

A few more statements need to be made about the dem that follows a noun in a noun phrase. In the literature, it is generally regarded as just a plural marker but Ndimele (2013:1087) conceives it as a “totaliser in the sense that it can be used to express an accompaniment or a comitative notion, such as ‘X and company.’” He provides the following examples:

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1 Abbreviations and symbols used in this paper include: cop. = copula verb; -s = English plural morpheme; aux. = auxiliary verb; sg. = singular; pl. = plural; loc. = locative, perf. = perfective, SCM = subject concord marker, np = noun phrase, vp = verb phrase, o = object, adv. = adverbial, * = unacceptable sequence
4a. De gail dem dọn mari  
“The girl and co are married”

4b. Pita dem dọn mari  
“Peter and co are married”

However, in addition to what has been stated in the literature, we believe that the dem that follows a noun and is itself followed by a verb phrase as in all the examples in (2) and (3) above except (2b) can also be analyzed as an optional concord marker (subject or object). Concord markers are a common feature in many Nigerian languages which are substrate languages of NP and they can also be an optional element in sentence structure. The following examples are taken from Urhobo and Igbo which are indigenous Nigerian languages spoken in different parts of the country:

5a. Urhobo. Iyono na (ayen) cha  
Teachers the they(SCM) come  
“The teachers are coming”

5b. Igbo Ndinkuzi (ha) na bia  
Teachers they(SCM) prog. come  
“The teachers are coming”

Analyzing dem in this position as a concord marker is supported by the fact that it is possible to have a sequence of dem occurring in the same sentence: dem as plural marker and also as a concord marker. For example:

6a. Di draivas dem dem de kọm  
“The drivers are coming”

6b. Ọl im shidrẹn dem dem de abród  
“All his children live overseas”

6c. Pita dem dem dọn mari  
“Peter and his group are married”

2.2. Number, Gender and Case in Pronouns

In modern NP pronouns, number, gender and case are differentiated in such a way that makes them more similar to English than in the past, i.e., they appear to be decreolizing. The forms in (7) below are the standard NP forms from Elugbe and Omamor (1991:90) while those in (8) are the modern NP forms from our data.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mai</td>
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<td>yu</td>
<td>yu</td>
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<tr>
<td>i</td>
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<td>wi</td>
<td>wi/ọs</td>
<td>wi/awa</td>
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<td>una</td>
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<tr>
<td>dém</td>
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8. Modern NP Pronouns from our data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
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<td>a/ai</td>
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<tr>
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<td>dém</td>
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<td>dém</td>
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Notice that in the forms in (7) the first person plural object pronoun has two variants: wi and ọs that are used interchangeably but in our data, all our subjects used only the ọs variant which is like the
English ‘us’. Also in our data, the third person plural possessive pronoun has two variants, dem and dia which are used interchangeably.

In addition to the above, gender is distinguished in the third person singular pronoun in all three cases by modern NP speakers. In (9) below, we juxtapose some utterances in both standard NP and modern NP. Notice that the decreolizing forms in (9b,d,f, and h) are more similar to English than those in (9a,c,e, and g).

9.  Standard NP                                           Modern NP
    a. Mai mama giv wi fud   b. Mai mọmọ giv ọs fud
       My mother give we food   my mother give us food
       “My mother gave us food”
    c. I sì di man ọṣtade   d. shi sì di man ọṣtade
       He/she see the man yesterday   she see the man yesterday
       “He/she saw the man yesterday”
    e. a dọn giv am in fud   f. a dọn giv ha ha fud
       I perf. give him/her his/her food   I perf. give her her food
       “I have given him/her his/her food”
    g. Wi dọn giv dem dem mọni
       We perf. give them their money
       “We have given them their money”

2.3. Question Formation

Our investigation covers the derivation of both the Yes/No and Wh- questions. Our data reveal that the derivation of the Yes/No question remains the same as has been reported in the literature, that is, it is differentiated from the statement form by a rising intonation on the final syllable of the statement. In (10) below, we present some statements while the forms in (11) are their Yes/No question counterparts

10a  Yù dè kráì                      “You are crying”
    b. Wi gò gó di pàtí                   “We will go to the party”
    c. Màì pìkín dè plê                   “My child is playing”

11a  Yù dè kráì?  “Are you crying?”
    b. Wi gò gó di pàtí?          “Are we going to the party?”
    c. Màì pìkín dè plê?         “Is my child playing?”

As for Wh-questions, in the standard NP variety, these are introduced by Wh- phrases as has been aptly described by Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and exemplified by the forms in (12a,b,c, and d). However, in the modern NP variety, they are introduced by wh-words similar to those of English as exemplified by the forms in (12e,f,g, and h).

12.  Standard NP                                           Modern NP
    a. Wich ples wi de go?   e. Wiẹ n ples wi de go?
       Which place we prog. go   “Where are we going?”
    b. wich taim u tek kọm?   f. Wẹn u kọm?
       Which time you take come   “When did you arrive?”
    c. Wetin mek dem chop di fud?   g. Wai dem chop di fud?
       What make they eat the food?   “Why did they eat the food?”
    d. Wich pẹsin travu?   h. Hu travu?
       Which person travel?   “Who travelled?”

From the data presented in this paper, it is obvious that modern NP in Warri 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 decreolisation is to be expected since English is Nigeria’s official language and the language of upward social mobility.
3. Sociolinguistic Profile of NP

Given the hypothesis that NP may have originated as a contact language between English traders/missionaries and the Nigerian locals and that its spread could have been as a result of the faulty educational system which encouraged improper or incomplete acquisition of English (Egbokhare 2001), it is expected that it should disappear as more of its speakers acquire better education. Contrary to this, evidence from our data shows that NP among young educated speakers in Warri is actually growing at a high rate and it is fast becoming a threat to both the indigenous languages and English with which it co-exists. Even though NP is not accorded any official status by the Nigerian government, its sociolinguistic profile is rising as it has permeated all domains of language use including the home and school. 84% our young respondents claim that between NP, their mother tongue languages and English, they speak NP most fluently, that it is their most frequently used language and they have a very high level of emotional attachment to it. They argue that it is easier to acquire, requires no formal education, and lacks the complexity associated with the grammar of English or their mother tongue languages. The youth NP variety has a rich vocabulary with words that are either imported from surrounding languages or invented by its users making its syntactic system more complex than general NP. We present some examples below:

13  General NP: a. Efe dön de hongri wel wel
    Name prog hungry intensifier
    “Efe is becoming very hungry”

    b. Wetin mek yu eskort yọ frẹnd rich dat jonshon?
    What make you escort your friend up to that junction
    “Why did you escort your friend to that intersection?”

    hunger prog. blow Name intensifier

    b. Wai yu giv yọ frẹnd step rich dat jonshon?  (giv step = “escort”)

Comparing examples (13) and the (14) above, we notice that the subject, Efe, in (13) becomes the object in (14a), wetin mek in (13b) is replaced by wai in (14b) while eskort in (14a) becomes giv step in (14b). Although it is possible that some of the lexical items and expressions in modern NP variety may die or disappear with time, it is most likely that they would be replaced by other creations rather than for the language to shrink and die given the high level of emotional attachment the youths have towards NP.

The profile of NP in the media and the entertainment industry is also rising. It is frequently used in the electronic media; government relies heavily on it for its mass literacy/social mobilization programs; most of the ‘catchy’ advertisements both in the electronic and print media are in it and it is the most popular language in the entertainment industry. Its writing system is also getting standardized, thanks to the efforts of the Institut Francais de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA-Nigeria) as well as to the growing number of literary artists who are using it in their works.

Ironically, even though NP is so popular, its use in education is not well supported as 78% of our respondents prefer to be educated in English mainly because it is an international language and it is still the language of upward social mobility in Nigeria. A recent survey carried out across the Niger-Delta region by this writer to determine the rate of use of NP at the primary and secondary school levels of education revealed that in non-high brow schools, teachers often resorted to it to explain difficult concepts to their pupils and students: Our survey showed that in many public schools, it was common to hear teachers and their pupils produce structures like those in (15) below because the children lacked good models from which to learn Standard English:

15a. * The two buses has left
b. * My parents gives us money every morning and we gives it to the driver.
c. * Those who likes travelling sees a lot of things
Such utterances have led to the allegation by some individuals and groups that the poor quality of English used by many young people across Nigeria, even by university graduates, is traceable to the ‘corrupting influence’ of NP (see Jibril 1995) but this has also been countered by others (see Egbokhare 2001).

4. Conclusion and recommendation

It is obvious from this study that modern NP as used by young people who have completed secondary education in the English medium system of education in Warri, and indeed across the entire Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, is decreolizing, with its syntactic features becoming more similar to those of English. It is also a fact that in spite of their being exposed to better education, these young people feel more comfortable using NP than their mother tongue languages or English. Although NP has not yet been given official recognition by government, the linguistic map of the country cannot be complete without the NP. It is the single most spoken language in Nigeria with a population of over 80 million and still growing because, as a product of urbanization and as more rural communities become urbanized due to more formal education and industrialization, the number of NP speakers is also growing. (Actually, Faraclas (2013) estimates 100 million NP speakers now that the population of Nigeria has grown from 105 million in 1996 to 150 million in 2013) In fact, in the course of this investigation, we met a woman who said she was forced to start praying in NP because her children always made her a laughing stock whenever she prayed in her mother tongue, Urhobo. Thus, NP is very stable, not only in Warri and the Niger Delta region but across Nigeria. We project that in years to come in Nigeria, as NP grows in popularity and as more educated people drop the strict grammatical rules of English in favor of the simpler grammar of NP, a new ‘English’ which has the lexical/morphological features of English but the simple grammar of NP might emerge.

Therefore, we recommend that it is time for the Nigerian government to give full recognition to NP as a major Nigerian language to be used for national affairs as it is the case at present with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the three major Nigerian languages. To enhance the utility and value of NP, government must take the lead and partner with linguists, IFRA-Nigeria, educationists, language enthusiasts, legislators, writers and publishers, amongst others, to immediately develop the language, standardize its orthography and writing system, and encourage its use in both formal and informal realms so that the linguistic rights of those for whom NP is their first language (L1) can be protected and maintained.

References


