

## PIDGIN AS LINGUA FRANCA FOR ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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### Abstract

This paper looks into how inter-ethnic communication can be facilitated by the adoption of West African pidgins as the lingua franca in Anglophone West African countries. Although English is the official language in these countries, the language cannot be adopted as the language of wider communication because of the high level of illiteracy in these countries. The paper looks into the demerits of adopting any of the major indigenous languages as a lingua franca. The paper discusses the cementing role for inter-ethnic cohesion that the lingua franca will play in the Anglophone speaking countries of the sub-region, with rapid urbanization, West African pidgin is an ideal lingua franca since it is the only language for wider communication that is mutually intelligible in these countries.

### 1.0 Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to advocate for the adoption of a variety of West African pidgins as the Lingua Franca for wider communication in Urban Centres in anglophone West African Countries. The anglophone countries are former colonies of Great Britain. Each of these countries is a complex multilingual and multicultural speech community which stands on a linguistic tripod. They are the indigenous languages, English Language and West African pidgins. While English is the official language of these countries none of the countries has been able to adopt one of its indigenous languages as a national language. Language plays a very important role in the lives of a people. Language plays two main roles in a speech community. These roles are instrumental and informative. While English is used either as a tool or instrument for official functions in Anglophone West African countries, these countries lack a language that plays the informative function of serving as a cohesive tool for interpersonal and social interaction at the informal medium of communication. Urbanisation and sub-regional trade has now made the need for a sub-regional lingua franca imperative. Since

neither English nor one of the above five hundred indigenous languages has been able to play the cohesive urban function, we intend to look into the desirability of employing a variety of West African pidgin to fill the void.

## **2.0 Urbanisation and Language in Anglophone West African Countries**

In developing countries, urbanisation can be defined as growth in urban areas caused by rural-urban drift. The lack of basic amenities like pipe borne water, good roads, electricity and good educational institutions coupled with the lack of employment opportunities attract rural poor to seek for opportunities in the cities. This is a common phenomenon in the West African sub-region. Onwuka (2001:1) quotes Stratton (1978) who defines urbanisation thus:

Urbanisation is a spatial concentration of people in cities through migration, natural increase and territorial expansion of urban areas as their boundaries are redefined or as rural areas become urbanised.

Urbanisation has stabilised in the developed countries due to low fertility rate and massive development of the rural areas, through provision of infrastructures. This development has minimized rural urban drift. In developing countries, like anglophone West African countries, rural urban drift is on the accent due to lack of development in the rural areas.

In the developing countries most of the migrants from rural to urban centres are the poor and illiterates. They lack the financial base to rent decent accommodation in the urban centres and they lack the educational qualifications or basic skills to enable them secure good employment. These migrants are from different ethnic backgrounds.

Urbanisation in these countries has led to the emergence of big cities. Some of these big cities in each of the five countries are as follows: Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Kano, Onitsha and Aba are in Nigeria; Kumasi, Accra and Takoradi are in Ghana; Freetown, Bonthé and Gbangbantok are in Sierra Leone; Monrovia and Robertsport are in Liberia; and Banjul, and Georgetown are in the Gambia. While none of the urban centres in the Gambia has a population of more than fifty thousand the population of cities in Nigeria exceeds a million the mega city of Lagos is estimated to have a population of 10.3 million (United Nations 1995).

The effect of urbanization on the cities is twofold. They are environmental and linguistic. On the environmental impact of urbanization the emergence of slums and squatter settlements is a major feature. Since most migrants are poor, they can only afford accommodation in these settlements which lack basic amenities. Slum and squatter settlements breed street-kids, teenage prostitutes, school drop-outs and the large army of illiterates who constitute immense social problems to the cities.

Our focus in this paper is, however, mainly on the linguistic effect of urbanization. A socio-linguistic profile of each of these continues to show that each of them has a complex multilingual and multicultural nature. So, the urban centres are

populated by migrants from different ethnic backgrounds and these migrants are either illiterates or have varying degrees of literacy in English. Lagos, Port-Harcourt in Nigeria, can be used as a case study of the linguistic effect of urbanization on the city.

Lagos is located in the South West of Nigeria and Yoruba, one of the three national languages is spoken in this part of the country. The so called three national languages in Nigeria; Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, are in reality regional languages. Due to the fact that Lagos is a melting pot, native speakers of each of the about four hundred indigenous languages in Nigeria (Hanfold et al 1976) reside in the city. While English is the official language in Lagos, Yoruba is the language of wider communication for those who are proficient in the language. Within the past decade, Nigerian pidgin is now being used in conjunction with Yoruba as the language of informal communication by migrants from other ethnic groups in the country. Due to linguistic contact, there are also cases of code-mixing and code-switching between English and the indigenous languages.

Port-Harcourt is the most populous and most industrialized city in the South South geo-political zone in Nigeria. Nigerian pidgin (henceforth referred to as NP) is the lingua franca in this zone and this is the only language of informal and wider communication in this city. Both educated and uneducated inhabitants of this city use Nigeria pidgin for communication under informal settings. The linguistic setting in Lagos and Port-Harcourt respectively cuts across all urban centres in Anglophone West Africa countries.

### **3.0 The Demerits of Adopting either English or any Indigenous Language as the Language of Wider Communication.**

As stated earlier in this paper, the languages spoken in this sub-region stand on linguistic tripods which are the indigenous languages, the English language and West African pidgins. For West African pidgins to be adopted as the language of wider communication in anglophone West African countries, it means there must be factors that make it infeasible to encourage the adoption of either the English language or any of the indigenous languages as the language of wider communication in these countries.

#### **3.1 English Language**

The English language would have been the ideal language to adopt both as official language and language of wider communication because of the positive attitude that indigenes of anglophone West African countries have towards the language. The language is socio-culturally neutral and it has international power. Due to the respect that elites accord to English, Babajide (2001:15) quoting Bamgbose (1985) states that Nigerian elite are plagued by "linguistic imperialism." This plague permeates all the countries under discussion in this

paper. Despite the respect accorded to English language in these countries, the language cannot be adopted as the language of cross-cultural communication for two reasons.

Firstly, the variety of English used in these countries is the formal one Lamidi (2000:111) quotes (Crystal 1987) while discussing varieties of language thus:

There are different varieties of language that serve specific functions in the communities in which they are used. Variety is described as any form of a language which can be identified in a speech community (Crystal, 1987);

Although, English language in these countries have undergone "nativization" (Bamgbose 1995:20), the "School English" (Bamgbose op.cit:205) still remains the predominant variety of English used on these countries. While this variety is ideal for communication in formal settings by competent users of the language in these countries, the language is not often used by the speakers for informal Sutra and intra-cultural communication. So, another language other than the "School English" would be ideal for cross-cultural communication.

A second reason why English is impracticable as the language of cross-cultural communication in urban centres in these countries is high level of illiteracy in English language by residents of urban centres. While a large percentage of urban dwellers can communicate in the varieties of West African pidgin spoken in their respective country, a very negligible percentage is competent in the standard variety of English in their respective countries.

### **3.2 An Indigenous Language**

The idea of encouraging the use and growth of an indigenous language for cross-cultural communication within anglophone West Africa is not a Utopian one. In East and parts of South Africa Swahili is already a Lingua Franca. An indigenous language that can function as a lingua franca in this sub-region is Hausa. This language is a lingua franca in the northern part of most countries in the West Coast. The impracticability of the use of this language is due to the fact that speakers of other indigenous languages will not be favourably disposed to learning the language, because they feel it will be an imposition and an instrument of oppression and domination by native speakers of the Hausa language.

Vic Webb and Kennbo-sure (2001:11) underscore the problem of adopting an indigenous as a national language in African countries when they state:

Most African state have experienced serious problems with the construction of national integration (or "nation-building" as it is also called) and it is often argued that indigenous languages cannot play a role in national integration because of their divisive potential.

Nigeria was unable to adopt one of the three major Languages as a national language and opted for the multilingualism option as a means of drowsing ethnic conflicts. Indigenous languages in the sub-region are in competition and language conflicts which manifest regularly in ethnic conflicts are a regular occurrence. Ethnic

tension and the proliferation of militant ethnic groups have for a long time made West African regional integration a mirage.

Wole Soyinka (1977) knew the impracticability of adopting either English or any of the indigenous languages in Nigeria and by extension anglophone West Africa when he advocated for the adoption of an African, though non-indigenous language as the national language and indeed language of wider communication. He advocated the adoption of Swahili. Jowitt (1995:45) describes Soyinka's proposal thus:

... a serious proposal was made by Wole Soyinka, who advocated at the 1977 FESTAC that Nigeria should adopt Swahili as its national language. Among the merits of the proposal were that, on the basis at least of its phonological and grammatical structures, Swahili can be considered a language indigenous to Africa, it is a lingua franca in East Africa, it is already the national language of Tanzania and Kenya.

While it is impossible to adopt it as a national language in Nigeria because it has no national identity it is also impossible to transplant it to the West African sub-region to function as a lingua franca.

#### **4.0 West Africa Pidgins as a Lingua Franca for Anglophone West African Countries**

A review of the constraints militating against the adoption of either English or any of the indigenous languages as a lingua franca for anglophone West Africa serves as an insight into the adoption of West African pidgins as a lingua franca for anglophone West Africa. A brief discussion on West African pidgins will precede an enumeration of the factors in favour of its adoption as a lingua franca.

West African pidgin is a member of English-based Atlantic Creoles and pidgins. West African pidgin is also known as "...restricted English in West Africa" Holm (1988: 409). West African pidgins are made up of three sub-varieties. They are krio spoken in Sierra Leone, krio spoken in Liberia and West African pidgin English (W. A. P. E). W. A. P. E has three sub-varieties and they are spoken in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon. They are called Ghanaian pidgin (GP) Nigerian pidgin (NP) and Cameroonian pidgin (CP). They are mutually intelligible.

W. A. P. E. is not homogeneous in terms of varieties because it ranges from rudimentary pidgins to Creole-like varieties as attested to by Holm (Ibid .426) when he states:

*West African pidgins English includes many varieties, which range from rudimentary pidgins to highly expanded Creole like varieties that, serve as primary language for millions of West Africans.*

Nigerian pidgin is already Creolizing in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and due to the large numbers of speakers Faraclas (1996:1) gives an estimate of NP speakers thus:

A conservative estimate of the number of people who speak NP as a second Language would have to exceed 40 million and the number of first Language speakers has already: surpassed 1 million.

Faraclas (Ibid: 2) further adds that.

Nigerian pidgin will be spoken by most Nigerians by the year 2000 and it is already the most widely spoken Language in the country.

At this Juncture, it will be necessary to state two definitions of a pidgin. Holm (Op. cit 4-5) defines a pidgin thus.

A pidgin is a reduced Language that results (from extended contact between groups of people with no Language in common. It evolves when they need some means of verbal communication usually those with less power (speakers of substrate Language) are more accommodating and use words from the Language of those with more power (the superstrate), although the meaning, form and use of those words may be influenced by the substrate language.

Gilman (1979: 269) defines a pidgin thus:

A pidgin is held to be nobody's native Language originating from attempts by Europeans to communicate with socially inferior speakers of other Languages. A pidgin is neither fish nor fowl, neither European nor indigenous but an unhappy compromise between the two.

This first issue that has to be settled is whether one of the varieties of West African pidgins should be adopted as the Language of wider communication or a pidgin which will be an amalgam of W. A. P E. and krio should evolve. We are in favour of the former opinion since all the varieties are mutually intelligible. Elugbe (1995) attests to this fact when he states.

It is also unquestionable that mutual intelligibility exists amongst the English based pidgins of West Africa; Cameroon pidgin (CP) Ghanaian pidgin (GP) and Sierra

Leone pidgin (krio). The writer has been privileged to listen to all three and did not have much of a problem understanding them although he needed to adjust to such grammatical differences as krio's use of *na* where Nigerian pidgin uses *fo*.

NP	Krio	English
I de fo haus	I de na os	He is at home / in the house

We are in favour of the adoption of Nigerian pidgin due to the simple reason that NP has more speakers although it is not as developed as krio due to the simple reason that NP has more speakers. Since our main objective is the adoption of a Language for primary means of communication, all that needs to be done is to standardize the orthography.

The social prejudice against -NP as the Language of the illiterates and semiliterate is diminishing since it is now being used between the educated in informal settings especially in the Niger Delta region. It is also a language of advertising and the language of political campaign by both gubernatorial and presidential aspirants.

### 5.0 Advantages of West African Pidgin as the Language for Sub-Regional Integration in Urban Centres.

The advantages that will accrue to the West African sub-region if one variety of West African pidgins develops as the language of wider communication in urban centres are immense. Some of them are enumerated below.

First, the Language would enhance sub-regional integration. Since the West African sub-region is now undergoing sub-regional integration, the major tool for this integration is the use of a common Language for cross-cultural communication at the informal medium in the urban centres. If neither English nor any of the indigenous Languages can be used for informative function, the ideal language is a variety of West African pidgins. As Oilman (Op. Cit: 269) rightly puts it, West African pidgins, like any other pidgin, is "— neither European nor indigenous" therefore the Language is socio-culturally neutral. So, the disadvantages of adopting either English or any indigenous Language are taken care of by an africanized variety of English.

The second advantage is that it will enhance commercial activities across the sub-region. NP, which is the variety we suggested should be adopted, is already playing informative function in urban centres and military formations in Nigeria. It is also the Language of commercial transactions by Nigerian traders in Cotonou in Benin Republic and Abidjan in Ivory Coast. So, this variety of West African pidgins is already used even in Franco-phone countries. It is pertinent to state here that a substantial percentage of the commercial activities in this West African sub-region takes place in the urban centres.

Finally, the Language is ideal as a means of oral communication because the Language needed for sub-regional integration in the urban centres is one to be used mainly for oral communication. So the fact that NP has no standard orthography and the fact that it is not officially recognized in Nigeria are not impediments to the Language playing its integrative function; on the other hand, it will encourage the evolution of a common and standard West African pidgins that will play the prototype function of Swahili in East Africa.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine the feasibility of encouraging the adoption of West African pidgins as the language of wider communication in urban centres in anglophone West African countries and eventually in the West African subregion. The paper also examines the demerits inherent in adopting either English or any of the numerous indigenous Languages. This paper also provides enough facts to buttress the merits inherent in adopting a variety of

West African pidgins. The advantages that will accrue to the sub-region which will include enhanced commercial activities and sub-regional integration were also discussed. The paper believes that if eventually this variety of West African pidgins is sufficiently developed with a standard vocabulary and orthography, it will be to the West African sub-region what Swahili is to the East African sub-region.

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