PRESENTING A CASE OF PIDGIN ENGLISH AS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDING ITS PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIP WITH STANDARD ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper examines the initiation and development of Pidgin English as a contact language in Sub-Saharan Africa and its controversial relationship with standard English. The perception of Pidgin English as a second-class language in comparison to standard English continues to undermine those who speak it as a primary one. However, its rich history, significance in the education system and ability to express all the needs of its speakers provide a strong case for its legitimization.

Keywords: *Colonisation, Communication, Lexicon, Pidgin, Standard English.*

1. INTRODUCTION

African dialects of Pidgin English developed from the contact language initially used by the colonial powers in the 16th Century as a communication tool throughout the establishment of the protectorate colonies in North Africa. Although, Pidgin as a contact language was consistently viewed as efficient, the negatives, stemming from its imperfect and broken lexis, became difficult to discard regardless of the embedded status it holds within the African linguistic culture (AFEADIE, 2015). The main theme explored throughout this paper is the problematic relationship that arose from the coexistence of Pidgin and standard English on the African continent, and the foreseeable consequences as a result of the lack of global recognition for the language. Shifts in global power and changing attitudes within Africa with regards to Pidgin as a legitimate variety of English, even as an official language, led to an evident split of a prescriptive/descriptive variety. Thus, the classification of whether Pidgin can be both a contact and an official language continues to be questioned as lines become increasingly blurred (JENKINS, 2015). This paper presents the factors supporting the classification of Pidgin as an official language, its historical significance, linguistic development, potential as a lingua franca, social impact and educational problems, as well as the global power shift.

2. THE BIRTH OF PIDGIN

Nigerian Pidgin emerged as a product of linguistic supply and demand over a series of stages during the colonial period. From the 15th Century Portuguese to the British traders, missionaries and colonisers of the 18th Century, the indigenous populations of this presumably undeveloped land (coastal Africa) had to develop a means of communication via a contact language (MANN, 1996). The geographical variation present in Pidgin English resulting from colonisation is recognisable and a close examination of its characteristics provides the evidence of its origin and it can also be used to map the development over time in correlation with the changing wave of colonial rulers. Furthermore, its lexis, drawn from the dominant European lexifier languages, represents an indicative of a long colonial history and can be likened to other linguistic shifts in history, such as the "usage of "trade Latin" in the Hanseatic League during the Middle Ages" (MUFWENE, 2009). It is therefore acceptable to argue a case for the legitimacy of Pidgin English. The lexis includes predominantly English words intended to ease communication during business dealings and colonisers mastered conversations through

the financial promise they gave and the prestige they held.

Leith (1996) spoke of population developments occurring as a result of the colonial period, acknowledging how "sparser colonial settlements maintained the precolonial population in subjection and allowed a proportion of them access to learning English as a second or additional language" (JENKINS, 2015). This is significantly different to other developments that took place, in which pre-colonial populations were either displaced (Australia and America) or replaced (Caribbean islands of Jamaica and Barbados) and supports the current split within Pidgin-speaking countries between those who primarily use Pidgin, those who use indigenous languages and those who use standard English (JENKINS, 2015). The fact that there was no route put in place by the colonising powers, due to a lack of both financial and academic resources, made it impossible to enforce standard English on an entire pre-colonial population. As time progressed through to the post-colonial situation, standard English became less of a necessity and those who never mastered it or were not born into it simply had no initiative to learn.

3. A CASE FOR LEGITIMISATION

Although African Pidgin is not recognised as a formal language, the development of its own varietal characteristics forms the basis of an argument as to whether Pidgin was nativized and subsequently has a right to be legitimised. Mufwene raises an interesting point regarding the connection between a contact language and its determination as an illegitimate offspring. Other varieties of English, such as Irish Englishes, were classified as legitimate offspring on the sole basis that speakers came from native English-speaking communities (MUFWENE, 2002). However, Decamp counters this view, arguing the initial emergence of Pidgin, its developmental route and whether this was at all dissimilar to the routes of other official languages (MANN, 1996). Nowadays, dialects are no longer identically spoken to how they were when they first arose and to assume that they are in any way similar, void of all adaptation, would be absurd. Therefore, if the differing opinions laid out by both prescriptivists and descriptivists are broken down, it is plausible to suggest that all languages began as contact languages, used to simplify communication between alternate varieties with prescriptivism being a result and commentary and not an instruction.

Historical significance also provides a case for legitimacy as Africa emerged from colonialism with three strands of African English, developing in correlation with their respective regions: Southern, Eastern and Western. At the time, the debate was not whether they classified as legitimate or illegitimate, but rather where the line lay between what constituted features of African English or features of 'learnerese' (incorrectly learned English) (JENKINS, 2015). Similar processes continue to take place today, but the acceptance of African English took a step backwards as the perceived danger to standard English (SE) increased. Though, it is important to highlight that the classification of Pidgin as an official language is not a direct threat to the preservation of SE in Africa, as the languages have co-existed for hundreds of years and can continue to do so. If a greater emphasis is placed on the acknowledgment of what is being communicated by those speaking Pidgin, it could present an opportunity within the education system, for example, to stop penalising students based on their language usage.

Nevertheless, the reason remains unclear why, after so much development and embeddedness, Pidgin is not acknowledged as a formal language. Opinions on legitimacy differ between linguists and some argue it is a corruption in that the evolution stemmed from an already evolved language (JENKINS, 2015). But this view can be countered by asking what constitutes an 'already evolved' language? Language represents a continuous development, from the transition of old to middle, to modern English, to the continuous expansion of the English language lexicon. The assumption that legitimacy is based upon evolution is merely ignorant to the idea of linguistic evolution in the first place.

4. A CASE AGAINST LEGITIMISATION

Wardhaugh argues that Pidgin cannot be classified an official language in African states because it is void of native speakers and is merely a contact language based upon the multilingual situation of the colonial period (Wardhaugh, 2006). Analysing this argument, Pidgin was induced by the pressure to elicit communication and improve the language system and, as a result, it did not evolve in the traditional sense. But a similar connection can be made with regards to the evolution of English from West Germanic and even Norse roots as a result of medieval invasion. Canagarajah presents the argument that learners of a non-native language are merely emulating the fluency and competence of native speakers, implying that they will never be considered proficient because of an undeveloped first language (CANAGARAJAH, 2007). If this is transferred to Pidgin, also described by some linguists as undeveloped, then an individual who primarily speaks this variety of English will never be said to have an official first language.

5. PIDGIN AS THE NEW LINGUA FRANCA

Returning to the historical significance, once the post-colonial period emerged so did the willingness of African countries to continue developing, practicing and refining Pidgin into an even more accessible method of communication. The youth continue to restructure and relabel in order to adapt it for the urban community, whilst ads, literature and media outlets all communicate in Pidgin. This raises the question as to why African governments still hold such negative connotations towards a language that has been ingrained into its population for centuries and why there is little attempt to standardise when the educational impact of not doing so has a clear negative result. Tribal languages such as Yaruba and Haussa are recognised and revered by communities, even though the former only became dominant in the 17th Century, and the differentiation between those languages and Pidgin is becoming increasingly blurred (MANN, 1996). Furthermore, Meierkord (2005) highlighted similarities between ELF and Pidgin, such as segmentation, 'utterances shortened into casual or phrasal segments', and regularisation, 'movement of focused information to front of utterance'. However, when analysing the current use of Pidgin within as opposed to between communities, it can be argued that it moved beyond a contact and ELF language and ought to be recategorized as official (CANAGARAJAH, 2007).

6. THE THREAT TO STANDARD ENGLISH

Analysing the social functions of Pidgin creates a case against the perception that its coexistence with standard English is problematic and will have future consequences. As Pidgin lexis became extensive, its speakers can satisfy a complete range of social functions that stretch beyond the original criteria of a contact language. Its use in education, the mass media, literature and even the Bible, demonstrates its capacity of being able to express all the needs of those who speak it (OSOBA, 2014). With regards to SE, it served its purpose during the colonial period, a purpose crafted by the colonial powers who then reaped the benefits, but when the outside pressure was taken away and the former protectorate given freedom to satisfy its own needs, the demand for SE was questioned. The use of Pidgin may actually serve the interests of the indigenous languages to a greater extent than SE has and ever will. However, a recurring issue in academia on the use of Pidgin is that despite the wide use of English in Nigeria, it is not practiced to a passible standard, having further isolating impacts on political participation for native speakers. Due to their poor proficiency in standard English, many Nigerians are restricted from fully entering the national debate and although Nigerian Pidgin is used to improve self-expression, it has detrimental effects when this cannot be taken out of the community and into the political realm (MANN, 1996). There is a strong case that some Nigerians are being denied their identity because the language of their 'self' is not formally recognised and more

research has to be conducted in order to identify exactly what is preventing this legitimisation from happening. Thus, the debate on whether Pidgin serves the needs of its speakers as well as English serves the needs of the whole community is ongoing, with no determinate outcome.

7. IMPACT ON EDUCATION

A large proportion of the case against the legitimisation of Pidgin English is based on a relatively recent fall in educational standards across Nigeria and Cameroon – particularly in secondary and tertiary institutions. The reasons behind this decline are not clear, but some linguists and officials argue a strong link between Pidgin and its effect on the proficiency and execution of standard English. Whitehead affirms that "Africans… viewed English academic education as a means to social and economic advantage and, for some, eventual political power". Language and power are directly correlational with a broader knowledge of and ability to speak multiple, globally recognised languages, posing a significant advantage for third world countries (MANN, 1996).

Looking back to pre-independence Nigeria, the government and trading companies required natives to be literate in English in order to ensure that the courts and administration ran effectively. This led to a relationship between proficiency and employment and English teaching was enforced in schools as colonial languages became both a necessity and a benefit. Although the indigenous mother tongues were not erased, they were treated with a 'benevolent tolerance' and perceived as a bridge to learning the more superior colonial language (MANN, 1996). As English became embedded within business and the education system, independence emerged with colonial legacy in schools, being carried over almost without change.

However, inadequacies existed as before with regards to teaching staff, teacher training and textbooks; it was equally, if not more difficult, to enforce effective state control over the education system. The 1979 Constitution gave a legal stamp to the role of English as an official language of the federation, even though other Nigerian languages had been chosen by State Assemblies for business. It is such contradictory instruction that makes regulation difficult and creates an altered perception of the status communities ought to be giving to standard English (MANN, 1996).

Although English is viewed as the gateway to qualifications and career success within Nigeria and Cameroon, perhaps some of the blame for the educational downfall can be placed on the curriculum and its lack of acknowledgment of Pidgin. One study highlights that teachers favoured the use of Pidgin in education more than students due to its nature and status; the issue regarding standardisation was considered greater than Nigerian Pidgin's hinderance on the learning of English in education (MANN, 1996)[i]. However, this does not dominate the issue that Nigerian Pidgin is not considered a world language and will certainly not be accredited academically on a global scale when it is disregarded by educational institutions closer to home. Bamgbose (2013) argues that 'a major problem with the educational system of most African states is educational failure, which may be traced to the language of instruction' (SOLOMON, 2015). There is neither a push to change curriculum in favour of African Pidgin, nor an effort to resolve the poor standards of standard English, creating a linguistic limbo for students and their educational future. Until Nigerian Pidgin and Standard English can be accommodated simultaneously, the relationship between them will continue to be problematic. Wardhaugh highlights how the history, structure and array of functions present in Nigerian Pidgin develop its status from a 'bad' variety of English to something much more meaningful. With a possibility of gaining recognition, the argument for its abolishment in education is experiencing increasingly less weighting (SOLOMON, 2015;WARDHAUGH, 2006).

8. PIDGIN IN BUSINESS

Now that Nigeria conducts business with emerging global powers such as China, who adopted Pidgin as a contact language in business with Nigeria, it is within reason to suggest the

future may see standard English marginalised in the West African country. Using evidence from the post-colonial period, when political agents conducted most of the vital business for the protectorate government, the previous point of view can be supported by the relationship between diplomacy's necessity to British policy and the agent's necessity to diplomacy. This domino effect was only tangible because of in-depth knowledge of local cultures and fluency in Pidgin that political agents possessed (AFEADIE, 2015). This demonstrates and supports a theory in which the significant resource that prevented Nigeria from being a power independent of colonisers was the lack of financial strength, as they maintained, if not controlled, communication. Agents established and managed with great responsibility the government relations with the traditional rulers and Afeadie notes how "agents dominated the process of negotiating and maintaining political and commercial treaties" (AFEADIE, 2015). The use of 'dominated' validates the impact agents had in the colonisation of their own nation and the delicate balance of power in which they found themselves.

Furthermore, a triangle can be observed when looking at the colonial period and early post-colonial period between Nigerian businesses, English-speaking powers and international businesses in which intermediaries were necessary for effective communication in proceedings. However, as mentioned earlier, other global powers are now adopting Pidgin, removing standard English as the intermediary and forming a two-participant system. As a result, standard English in Nigerian business is becoming less of a necessity partly due to the development and efficiency of Pidgin in effectively communicating all needs. This shift in the power balance between language use in Africa, specifically Nigeria, provides strong evidence as to why standard English is being marginalised but not completely outlawed. Indigenous languages have stood the test of time and remain key pillars of culture, and although Nigeria cannot escape its history, it can change its perspective on standard English. There is no longer a stigma that English is the imperial language, however, the pragmatic reasons for the continuation of its use demonstrate how Nigerians are utilising it for personal benefit by operating bilingually in a multilingual society (JENKINS, 2015).

Furthermore, Planken (2005) highlights the acceptance of LFE by referencing intercultural business communication. Preparatory work is undertaken through opening comments used to gauge a suitable medium that benefits both parties and establishes equal ground. It touches upon the idea that LFE is used to move away from the linguistic norms of first languages in order to facilitate communication – the focus – and subsequently, business deals (CANAGARAJAH, 2007). Nigerian Pidgin began almost identical to LFE, with the same intention of facilitating business and trading deals. However, despite the similarities, Pidgin is still denied all official categorisations apart from unofficial and broken.

9. CONCLUSION

Haugen argued that the concept of language as "a rigid, monolithic structure is false, even if it has proved to be a useful fiction in the development of linguistics" (CANAGARAJAH, 2007). This idea forms the basis of my conclusion, language, of any variety, begins as a descriptive process developing over time. As a result of emerging consistencies such as lexis and structure, prescriptivism develops for society to apply standards and lay claim to their native language. Therefore, linguists, governments and education authorities have little right to determine the authenticity of Pidgin when it is not intended to be a comparison for standard English, but a language in its own right because 'English is too distant – linguistically, psycholinguistically and socioculturally – to serve the higher goal of liberation and emancipation from underdevelopment' (MANN, 1996). Africa, particularly Nigeria, cannot be free from its colonial history without severing ties with English as its main official language. English is a superstrate of prestige, influence and, most significantly, power, whereas Pidgin is considered a substrate and second to its superior (AFEADIE, 2015). If the world and even African governments cannot dispel the notion that Pidgin will ever be equal to standard English, then it will always

carry a second-class status. The basis of change sits within the public opinion of Pidgin as opposed to the linguistic features of the language itself. If the world immerses itself in the cultural significance held by Pidgin, it will become clear that the debate is more than a correct vs. incorrect language.

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Endnotes

[i]240 subjects with a 50/50 teacher/student split.