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The Standard Sociolect of Naija and the Formal Use of the Language in Liturgical and Advertising Registers

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Abstract

This essay discusses the sociolects of Naija with an aim into identifying the standard sociolect. The geographical spread of the standard sociolect in the Niger Delta region is also analyzed. It also discusses the formal use of Naija with a focus on the registers in liturgy and advertising. It concludes that the formal use the language foregrounds its rising profile.

I. Introduction

The general issue of the development of a pidgin into a creole and research on the phonological and syntactic features of a creole that is decreolising into its lexifier language has received considerable attention in pidgin and creole linguistics (Bickerton, 1982). The earlier generation of Europeans and linguists that discovered the peculiarity of pidgins and creoles as distinct speech forms believed that the languages were perversions of European languages. Derogative names ascribed to them included *broken English*, *bastard Portuguese*, *Nigger French* and *Isikula* (cookie language) (Mahlhauser, 1986).

Due to the elaboration in the domain of use of the standard sociolect of Naija, its creolization and its use in formal contexts have changed the status of the language from a low standing one, spoken mainly by urban semi-literates and illiterates between the 1960s and 1980s, to a high status language within the past two decades.

This essay focuses on two important themes which are relevant to the study of Naija. First, an attempt is made to identify the standard sociolect of Naija. It undertakes a comparative analysis of the “creolized” variety that has been well documented by Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and the mesolectal sociolect which is now flourishing in the area where Naija has creolized. The mesolectal sociolect has now replaced Elugbe and Omamor’s creolized variety which is now the basilectal sociolect. Second, the essay discusses the formal use of Naija in advertising and liturgy. Our analysis of the latter focuses on some new age churches in Warri/Sapele speech community in Delta State, Nigeria.

II. Naija

In Nigeria, Naija is an indi-exogenous language (Oyeleye, 2005). It is English related because English is its superstrate language and the bulk of its vocabulary is derived from it. Its syntactic structure is, however, that of kwa languages. Moreover, it has a national spread and it is central to the lives of many Nigerians, especially in the Niger Delta region. As an ethnically neutral language, Naija is now a bridge between English and the indigenous languages. It has a close affinity to the indigenous languages as a language of horizontal camaraderie and, like the indigenous languages, it conforms to Ferguson’s low status since it is used for intimate relationships. Due to the close affinity between Naija and indigenous languages in terms of structure and function, the language can aptly be described as a neo-Nigerian language.

Although Naija does not exist officially, it is the most widely spoken language in Nigeria (Faraclas 1996, Elugbe 1995). It is Nigeria's language of wider communication. Naija is a member of West African Pidgin English (W.A.P.E). The three sub-varieties of W.A.P.E are Ghanian Pidgin (GP) (Naija) and Cameroonian Pidgin (CP)¹. Elugbe (1995) observes that the three varieties are mutually intelligible. W.A.P.E is a member of a larger group called West African Pidgins which also has three varieties namely, Sierra Leonian Krio, Liberian Kru and W.A.P.E. Holm (1988:409) states that West African pidgins is also known as "restricted English in West Africa". West African pidgins is one of the group of English-based Atlantic creoles and pidgins. The four groups of Atlantic creoles and pidgins are West African pidgins, spoken in parts of West Africa, Scranum spoken in Surinam, East Caribbean Creoles spoken in Barbados, Virgin Island and Guyana and West Caribbean Creoles spoken mainly in Jamaica and Panama.

We believe that the origin of Naija predated the contact Nigerians and freed slaves from Sierra Leone in the 2nd half of the 19th C. These freed slaves were known as Saro (Banjo 1996). Singler (1992) observes that an English lexifier 'core' creole had emerged along the upper Guinea coast of West Africa in the 1600s. Mulattos were the offspring of the intermarriage between the English traders and natives. It is believed that the mulattos became the first speakers of the proto-creole Guinea Coast Creole English (GCCE). We are of the opinion that it was a variety of this 'core' Guinea Coast Creole English that was also spoken in the coastal areas of Nigeria. So, Antera Duke's diary of events in Calabar between 1785 and 1788 (Banjo 1996) and a passage written by King Opubu in his communication between him and the British traders in 1824 (Mafeni 1971:97) are varieties of the 'core' Guinea Coast Creole English.

Naija is not homogenous in Nigeria. It varies from a creole in parts of the Niger Delta to a trade language in other parts of the country. The standard sociolect of Naija that has been identified is based on its elaborate use and creolization. The two varieties of this standard sociolect are Warri/Sapele or western variety and Port Harcourt or eastern variety of standard Naija.

III. The Standard Sociolect of Naija

The three sociolects of Naija identified in the literature are basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal. Any other variety of Naija that does not fall into any of these three sociolects can be aptly described as a pseudo-pidgin. A pseudo-pidgin can be defined as a substandard form of English. Broken English falls into this category. (See Elugbe, B. and Omamor, A. 1991 pp.47-73).

The most detailed comparative analysis of sociolects of pidgins and creoles in the literature was undertaken by Bickerton (1975:24) who used Guyanese creole for his case study. He defines the three sociolects which represent sectors of a continuum thus:

¹ For a detailed analysis of the formal life of Cameroonian Pidgin, see Culmun C. 1979. "Cameroonian Pidgin English: A Neo-African Language." Hancock, I.F. et al (eds) *Pidgins and Creoles*. London, Blackwell Publishers.

The term basilectal was originally used by Stewart (1965) [...] basilect will be used to refer to that variety of Guyanese creole most distinct from English, acrolect to refer to educated Guyanese English (a variety which differs from other standard varieties of the language only in a few phonological details and a hand full of lexical items) and mesolect to refer to all intermediate varieties.

He adds that since the term mesolect covers a broad range, three sub-types of mesolect can be identified and he refers to them as lower, intermediate and upper varieties. While the lower mesolect is that of the mesolect closest to the basilect, upper mesolect is closest to the acrolect. Bickerton concludes that mid-mesolect is equidistant from basilect to acrolect. The acrolectal sociolect also covers three broad ranges.

We believe that Faraclas (1996:2) was motivated by Bickerton's analysis, of the three sociolects of Guyanese creole, in his identification of the three sociolects of Naija. For convenience of description, Naija may therefore be divided into three sets of sociolects, acrolect (creolised) variety which show significant influence from Nigerian standard English, basilectal (pidginized or repidginized) variety which show significant influence from Nigerian languages, and mesolectal (decreolising) variety which typify the speech of those who use Naija in most of their daily interaction or who have learned Naija as a first language.

We concur with Faraclas observation that the mesolectal variety is the standard sociolect of Naija; justifiably, he used data from the mesolectal sociolect for the analysis in his text. We, however, disagree with his sweeping generalizations that the three sociolects are used in all parts of Nigeria. It is our belief that while the basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal are found mainly in the two parts of the Niger Delta region where the two varieties of standard Naija exist, the acrolectal and 'pseudo pidgins' are found in the other parts of Nigeria where Naija is spoken. It is discovered that highly educated respondents from the Warri/Sapele speech community, where standard sociolect of Naija is spoken, use the acrolectal sociolect. It is pertinent to state here that the difference between the three sociolects is very tenuous because they constitute a continuum. From our data, it was discovered that respondents from Warri/Effurun/Sapele community where Naija sociolect is spoken as a mother tongue use the mesolectal sociolect.

The lower acrolectal variety which is very close to the mesolectal, can also be found in other parts of Nigeria like Benin City, Edo State, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State and Ajegunle in Lagos. While Benin City was the capital of Bendel State from which Delta State was carved out, Yenagoa is sandwiched between Warri and Port Harcourt. Ajegunle has a large community of indigenes from Warri-Effurun/Sapele speech communities.

First, the use of Naija as a lingua franca is always associated with the Niger Delta region in general as well as the two speech communities, Effurun/Warri/Sapele and Port Harcourt and their environs, in particular. This association of Naija as a lingua franca with these two speech communities reinforces the belief of the present researchers that the upper mesolectal or standard sociolect of the language exists in these two speech communities. Gani-Ikilama

(1990:220) buttresses this belief when he states: "Pidgin is central to the lives of many Nigerians, especially in places like Bendel, and Rivers States". We however disagree with Gani-Ikilama's sweeping generalization and assert that the standard sociolect is found mainly in parts of old Bendel State and parts of Rivers State. The problem of the identity of Naija in its diversity can be solved by sifting out speakers who use the language in its decreolised and the pidginized forms, thereby delineating the boundaries of the mesolectal speakers of Naija².

Below are examples of utterances in the acrolectal, (decreolized) mesolectal and basilectal sociolects of Warri/Sapele variety of Naija.

1. ENG: The boys have come/arrived
 A: **Di bọis dọn kọm**
 M: **Di bọi (-s, dẹm) dọn kọm**
 B: **Di bọi (dẹm) dọn kọm**

2. ENG: My mother gave us rice and chicken
 A: **Mai mọmsi giv ọs rais an chikin**
 M: **Mai mọmsi giv ọs rais an fao/chikin**
 B: **Mai mama giv wi rais an fao**

3. ENG: When will you wash our uncle's shirts?
 A: **Wen yu go wọsh awa ọnkul shets**
 M: **Wen/wich taim yu go wọsh awa brọda shet (s/dẹm)**
 B: **Wich taim yu go wọsh wi brọda shet/clọt (dẹm)**

4. ENG: The lady's breasts are rather small
 A: **Di ledi brests de vẹri smọl**
 M: **Di wuman im brest (s/dem) de smọl wẹl wẹl**
 B: **Di wuman im bọbi (dem) smọl wẹl wẹl**

(Key : ENG= English, A = Acrolectal, M = Mesoclectal, and B = Basilectal).

From our findings, the mesolectal sociolect exists in a speech community where Naija is endangering indigenous languages. The Sapele speech community in Delta State falls perfectly into this group. In parts of Sapele metropolis known as *Oguanja* and *Urban Area*. *Okpe*, *Itsekiri*, *Ijaw* and *Urhobo* as well as English and *Naija* are spoken within a radius of about 10 square kilometers. Naija has a community of native speakers in these two communities. However, Naija is now endangering these indigenous languages since it now has a community of native speakers. The same phenomenon obtains in Effurun/Warri speech community where Uvwie,

² See Mowarin, M. (2005-2006) "Nigerian English and its Pidgin as Cause of endangerment of Uvwie and Okpe in Delta State, Nigeria". In Taiwo, A (ed) *Research on African Languages and Linguistics* (RALL) 7. pp.162-175.

Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, English and Naija are spoken. Naija is the undisputed lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication in these two speech communities. Native speakers of Naija can be found in the following areas in and around Warri, Ałębọ and Alaka area in Effurun; Kolokolo layout and Orhuwhuruu, in Udu, Warri and Okere and Makaiva area in Warri. The elaboration and creolization of Naija in these two speech communities are causes of endangerment of the indigenous languages; it has penetrated the homes of the average Uvwie, Okpe and Urhobo families; what is more, it is fast becoming the language of intergenerational transmission in most homes². It is highly improbable for a language without a standard sociolect or a community of native speakers to endanger other languages. Since Naija is now a source of endangerment of other languages, we believe that it has both a standard sociolect and a community of mother tongue speakers.

In the Port Harcourt axis, Naija has also penetrated the orbit of homes in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area where Ikwerre, an Igboid language, is the mother tongue of the indigenes. Due to the high density of migrants into this speech community, Naija is now the lingua franca and it is seriously endangering Ikwerre. There is unanimity among most Nigerians that Warri and Port Harcourt are iconic representations of urban centres in Nigeria where Naija is a lingua franca. This belief also reinforces our assertion that the mesolectal sociolect exists mainly in these two communities.

Naija is not a lingua franca in Bayelsa, Edo, Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States due to the fact that they are linguistically homogenous. Ijoid and Edoid family of languages are spoken in Bayelsa and Edo State respectively. Members of the two families of languages are partially intelligible. Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States can be said to be fairly homogenous linguistically. While Ibibio is the major indigenous language in Akwa-Ibom State, Efik is predominant in Cross River State. What is more, the two languages are partially intelligible. Apart from the state capital of the four states above where the acrolectal sociolect and pseudo-pidgins are spoken, the influence of Naija fades out in the local Government areas.

IV. Naija as the language of liturgy and advertising

The elaboration of the function of Naija has resulted in the language stepping into formal domains hitherto known as strictly belonging to the English language. It is now used in schools, media houses, liturgy and advertising. This section discusses the use of Naija as the language of liturgy and advertising despite the institutional prejudice against it.

Liturgy

Naija is now the language of liturgy in mainly new age churches in Warri/Sapele speech community. In orthodox churches like Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Methodist, Naija is being used by the respective clergymen in their sermons, however, they are mainly cases of code-mixing and code-switching with the English language. Interpretation is usually done in the indigenous like Itsekiri, Urhobo, and Ijaw. In Word of Life Bible Church Ajamimogha, Warri, pastured by Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, there is interpretation of the pastor's sermon in English into

Naija. There are now services in indigenous languages; however, if the officiating priest is not proficient in the language. An interpreter interprets into the indigenous language. Here is a case of code mixing at a mass in St. Brigid Catholic Church Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria on 14th of June 2009 during an English mass at 6.00am.

Reverend Father:

A no go tolerate lateness and noise making ƒo dis shosh again. Una dey let bikos una no tek God serious. Good Catholics who fear God and respect Jesus and mother Mary no go let kpm choch.

English Translation

Reverend Father:

I will not tolerate lateness and noise making in this church again. You people come late because you don't take your worship of God seriously. Good Catholics who fear God, respect Jesus, and love mother Mary will not come late to church .

Naija is, most importantly, used to capture a large number of worshippers into their respective churches. The reason being that the youths are experiencing language loss in their indigenous languages while the elders as are not literate in English. So, Naija is used, or code mixed in churches as a bridge between the youths and elders as the language of liturgy in some new age churches in Warri.

Tele-evangelism is now a popular means of evangelization in Nigeria. Tele-evangelism is broadcast mostly by pastors of new age churches. New age churches in Warri/Sapele community that have bought air time in Delta Radio and Television (DRTV) Warri and NTA Sapele, broadcast several hours a week. The main aim of the pastors of these churches is to increase the numbers of their worshippers. As regards the use of language, the pastors propagate the word of God mainly in English; however, there are now a few cases of broadcast mainly in naija and several instances of code-mixing and code switching of English with Naija.

During Sunday sermon in some new age churches in Warri/Sapele speech community, Naija is the main language of liturgy. One of such churches is *Apostolic Fire Miracle Church* at No. 24, Maternity Road, Orhuwhorun, Warri where the data for the analysis below were collected on 14th September and 19th October. 2008. Below are two data:

- A. **Hu bi awa krietọ? God nọr bi so? Hau wi de tek meditet? Na to jọs de lai ƒo bẹd de tink? Dat nọr bi meditashon. Wi sọpos fri awa maind. Some pipul go ọn redio wẹn dem de meditet. Dat nọr bi meditashon bikos nọtin sọpos distọb ọs wẹn wi de meditet.**

English Translation

Who is our creator? Isn't it God? How do we meditate? Is it just to lie on bed thinking? That is not meditation because our mind must be free from thought about worldly

issues. Some people turn their radio on when they are meditating. That is not meditation because nothing should disturb us at all while we are meditating.

B **Wi wan luk at di taitul we sey wi bi di sɔlt ɔf di wɔld we dey Matiu 5:13. E sey wi bi di sɔlt to di wɔld. If sɔt nɔr ɣet test we nɔr go fit yus am. Wi go trowey am. Pipul go wɔsh am fɔ leg. Wi we bi Kristen sɔpos de liv wit di ezampul we jisɔs kraist liv fɔ ɔs bikɔs na wi pipul we no bi strɔng Kristen de luk.**

English Translation

We want to look at the title which says that we are the salt of the world we live in. Mathew 5:13 says that we are the salt of the earth. If salt is tasteless, we cannot use it, we will throw it away. People will trample on it. As Christians we are encouraged to live by the examples our lord Jesus Christ left for us because people who are not strong in faith look up to us.

From our personal interaction with the preacher; it was observed that he is marginally literate; therefore, he does not have sufficient command of Standard English to effectively use it to preach. Since the church is located in an urban slum in Udu near Warri, we also note that most members of the congregation are either illiterates or marginally literate; Naija is the ideal language of liturgy if there is to be effective communication.

A feature in the above data which permeates most new age churches in the Warri/Sapele speech community is the recourse to code-mixing and code-switching. Probable reasons for the phenomena include the following.

First, the preacher might not be competent in English due to the fact that his not a balanced bilingual in English and Naija. For this reason, he switches his language's code in order to express himself more fluently. Secondly, the Reverend/Preacher might decide to code mix and code-switch because he wants to express solidarity with a particular social group. In Warri/Sapele speech community, most youths, illiterate and semi literate elderly people are favorably disposed to being communicated to in Naija. So, the social group identified above is captured by the preachers/Reverends who code –mix and code switch. Finally, since Naija is an indi-exogenous language, (Oyeleye 2005); and an ethnically neutral one in Nigeria, Reverends/preachers in Warri/Sapele and Port Harcourt speech communities seek recourse to code-mixing and code switching in order to reduce the formality of their liturgical language and express solidarity with members of the various ethnic groups that worship in the respective churches.

It is pertinent to state here that the predominant use of Naija as the language of liturgy by pastors is very negligible. Out of the about twenty (20) Pentecostal churches visited in Warri/Sapele speech community, it is only in two (2) that Naija was exclusively used. However, code mixing and code switching is a regular phenomenon in all the churches.

Advertising

This section discusses advertising in Naija. Advertising informs, educates, persuades, woos, convinces and compels the audience towards a point of view. (Oyeleye, 1997) American marketing Association defines advertising as a paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of goods, services or ideas by profit and non-profit organization. An example of the later in Nigeria is government agencies like Ministries of Health and Education at both State and Federal levels. In relation to the normal use of language, advertising breaks the rule. This is because advertising is a creative enterprise; so, deviation from normal use of language by the sign writer is a common phenomenon.

Persuasion of the target audience is the main objective of an advert. The functions of advertising include: development of a brand, the need to have a competitive edge, to educate counteract prejudice and introduce a new product into the market. In Nigeria, Naija plays a pivotal role in advertising due to the popularity of the language as an indi-exogenous language. What is more, it is an ethnically neutral lingua franca; it is the most widely spoken language in the country. The target audience of an advert in Naija is incredibly large. Finally, the creativity in the use of Naija due to its numerous lexico-semantic processes has made the language a beautiful pride of advertisers.

Below are two adverts in Naija. While **kick polio commot fo Nigeria** is meant to educate and counteract prejudice by Nigerians about the disease; the second one titled *"Vitafoam"* is meant to develop a competitive edge of the brand of mattress. The former advert, initiated by the Federal Ministry of Health is non profit; the motif of the latter is increased sales.

- A. **Kik polio kọmọt fọ Naijiria** (from Radio Delta, Warri)
Abeg o, eni pikin wey neva pas 15 years we una si sey im hand and leg dey wik jọs laik dat, mek una kwik go ripọt fọ hẹlt centa wey dey nie una ples or fọ hẹlt officials fọ lokal govament. Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) surveillance. **Na Fẹdẹral Ministri of Hẹlt na im tọk am.**

English Translation

Kick polio out of Nigeria

Please, any child under the age of 15 years whose hands and legs are weak should be taken to a nearby health centre or to health officials of local government. Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) surveillance. This advert is from the Federal Ministry of Health

- B. Vitafoam (from Radio Delta-Warri)

Mama Junior: **Ha papa Juniọ yu min sey afta las nait yu stil ọet pawa to jọg?**

Papa Junior: **Yu no sey sins afta we dọn bai dat vitafoam, man bọdi dọn dey gidigba egen. A go stil do bẹta prẹs ọp bifọ A go wọk dis morin.**

Mama Junior: **Mai họsband e bi laik sey na mi an yu go du di prẹs ọp.**

Papa Junior: **Bifọ nkọ. Vitafoam ọ́ẹt kọmfọt, ọ́ẹt vitafoam.**

Vitafoam na di kwọliti we yu ọ́ẹt no ọ́ẹt mẹni yez.

English Translation

Mama Junior: Papa Junior you mean after last night you still have enough energy to jog?

Papa Junior: Don't you know that after we bought the vitafoam, I have become very strong? I will still do press ups before I go to work this morning

Mama Junior: It seems I will still do the press ups with you.

Papa Junior: Certainly.

Vitafoam, get comfort, get Vitafoam. Vitafoam is the quality you have known for years.

In terms of the relation of these adverts to the standard sociolect of Naija, we observed that they are in the acrolectal variety. For an advert to reach a substantial number of the Nigerian population, the acrolectal sociolect has to be used. In advert B, however, we notice that the perfective aspect marker (**ọ́ẹt**) is wrongly used. So **afta a ọ́ẹt** should be deleted from the ungrammatical subordinate clause: **sins afta wi ọ́ẹt bai [...]** (since after we bought [...]) to become **"sins wi bai [...]"** (since we past+buy [...]).

A feature common to adverts in Naija is the fact that they are mostly in electronic media to enable the advert achieve the target of reaching a broad spectrum of Nigerian population regardless of level of education. We believe however, that once the language evolves a standard orthography, adverts in Naija in the print media will increase tremendously.

V Conclusion

In conclusion, the essay sets out to identify the standard sociolect of Naija which is the mesolectal. It also discusses the geographical spread of this sociolect in the Niger Delta region. From our discussion, we note that, although the acrolectal sociolect is not the standard variety, it has the largest number of Naija speakers. This is why this sociolect is used for Advertising, liturgy and entertainment. The formal use of Naija in liturgy and advertising are also discussed. The motif behind the use of Naija in these two registers is to attract more worshippers and reach out to a broad spectrum of Nigerians respectively. While code-mixing and code-switching of Naija with English is common in liturgical register, it is rare in advertising. The formal use of Naija foregrounds the elevation of the language from a low status language to a high profile one.

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