The Question of the Superstrate and Substrate in Nigerian Pidgin

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Abstract

Languages in contact, developing a pidgin are classified into the base language and the dependent language(s), or the superstrate and substrate(s) respectively. This paper questions what justifies this classification with reference to Nigerian Pidgin. Considering vocabulary resources, Nigerian Pidgin is likely a version of English even though English is not a sole lexifier. The grammatical systems of Nigerian Pidgin demonstrate very extensively the grammatical systems of Nigerian languages. Based on the conviction that mainly grammatical operations describe the structure of a language, the paper concludes by proposing that either 1) the local languages be classified as the grammatical superstrate and lexifier substrate (that is, if degree of lexifying is considered) while English retains its status as the lexifier superstrate and automatically the grammatical substrate; or 2) a neutral reference to the languages forming the pidgin be generated, which excludes colonial colouration or imperialism. This paper prefers the latter and, in pursuance to this, it recommends "Trace Languages (TLs)", which it defines as the languages whose grammatical and/or lexical traces are evident in a pidgin. In other words, the trace languages of Nigerian Pidgin are English and the Nigerian languages.

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Introduction

A pidgin is a language with no native speaker; it is no one's first language but is a contact language (Wardhaugh, 1998:57). Wardhaugh explains that pidgin is a product of a multilingual situation in which those who wish to communicate must find or improvise a simple language system that will enable them to do so.

He points out that the process of pidginization probably requires a situation that involves at least three or more languages, one of which is clearly dominant. The speakers of the other languages that are inferior play a critical role in the development of a pidgin. They speak not only to those who are in the dominant position, but also to each other. In so doing, they simplify the dominant language in certain ways. Based on this, Wardhaugh presents the argument that pidgin arises from simplification of a language when that language comes to dominate groups of speakers separated from each other by language differences. According to him, this explains, first, the origin of pidgins in slave societies comprising slaves from different language backgrounds; second, their origin on sea coasts, where a variety of languages might be spoken but the trade language is a pidgin; and third, why pidginized varieties of languages are used much more as lingua francas.

Three issues are prominent in the foregoing: pidgin is a trade language; it is a simplified language and according to Akmajian et al (2006:296) has a reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure; and it is an auxiliary language which arises to fulfill certain limited communication needs among people who have no common language (Finch, 2000:229). The issue upon which this paper hinges is that pidgin is a simplified language. This introduces the superstratist view that pidgin is a simplification of the grammar of the lexifier superstrate (usually a

European language). In other words, a pidgin is a non-standard variety of the lexifier superstrate (Finney, 2004:61) or a second language variety of the lexifier or superstrate language which gradually diverged more and more from the latter via a process of basilectalization (Winford, n.d.). In the former case, we note that there are directionality dimensions, specifically the simplification of the lexifier language by its native speaker (the European). This brings in the baby talk theory which assumes a master-servant or superior-inferior social relation. Again, it supports Taylor's (1968: 609) report of Chevillard's view of simplification by the speakers of the standard language, analyzed technically by Koefoed (1979:41) as model simplification.

The other dimension is simplification by speakers of the other languages trying to learn the lexifier language, or Pelleprat's view of simplification arising from inaccurate acquisition of the standard language by the non-native learner speaker, as reported by Taylor (op cit). Pelleprat's view translates as Koefoed's (1979:41) learner simplification. This position supports Winford's reference to pidgin as a second language variety of the superstrate and suggests that there was an attempt by the Europeans to teach their languages to the local people to facilitate communication, and that the local people by exigency of the moment tried to learn the languages and ended up with an interlanguage characteristically called pidgin. Finney (2004) shares this view:

> Adult native speakers of substrate languages, because of minimal grammatical competence in superstrate European languages, were compelled to borrow grammatical structures from their primary (substrate)

languages into which they super imposed lexical items derived from superstrate languages, in their attempt to communicate with the speakers of superstrate languages.

Moreover, Finney's explanation brings to fore the substratist view that the development of pidgins is significantly influenced by African substrate languages. Hence, the grammatical features of West African languages are amply illustrated in the pidgins in the area.

The points raised so far suggest that Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is either simplified English by the visiting Britons to enable them communicate with Nigerians, or simplified English by Nigerians in their attempt to learn English for the purpose of communicating with the visiting Britons. A question that emerges here is who had more need to communicate with the others: the visitors or the host? Our cultural orientation makes us inclined to think that the visitor would have more need to communicate with the host. This is because it is the visitor that may need the help of the host. To secure the much needed help, the visitor cannot help but simplify his language with accompanying gestures and gesticulations. With the stabilization of the contact, the local people learnt the simplified English and adapted it to the systems of the local language. For us, this is more likely how NP evolved. If this is acceptable, then the issue of a dominant language or superstrate language does not arise. "Dominant" or "superstrate" seems to us a product of imperialism which commenced with colonization, at a time when "superiority" or "inferiority" may have been a key concern. Moreover, as has been identified, colonization has got nothing to do with the evolution of NP. This is evident in Gilman (1979: 270-272):

…the Europeans first came to the African coast to trade, and there is no doubt that the Pidgins and Creoles developed there long before the colonization of the continent at the end of the nineteenth century. It was only at this time that Europeans became in any sense the 'masters' of all Africans and Africans their 'subjects'....The assumption that every contact situation between Europeans and Africans involves the relation of superior to inferior, and that it was always the European who was superior must be a bias of the colonial time super-imposed on the pre- colonial past.

There is obviously an indication that the history of pidgins, including NP, is one-sided. Elugbe and Omamor (1991:24) assert that, 'we have some idea of the Europeans' side of the story about the *how* of the origin of pidgins. Unfortunately, though, for obvious reasons, the other side of the story is irretrievably lost in the past'. This one-sided information has thrived for years, yet even if the other side of the story is irrecoverable, there is the need to recognize cultural dimensions, as we have attempted to do in this paper.

Another reason why NP is considered "simplified English" is evidently the multilingual nature of Nigerian. The visiting Britons had people of diverse linguistic backgrounds as their hosts. It would have been difficult for them to learn all the languages of their host communities, hence a natural option was to simplify their language to satisfy communication needs with their hosts. Insight into this is provided by Wardhaugh (1998: 58):

> If only two languages are involved, there is likely to be a direct struggle for dominance, as between English and French in England in 1066, a struggle won in that case by the socially inferior language but only after more than two centuries of coexistence.

Even more crucial in Wardhaugh's statement is the fact that an "inferior language" can win the struggle for dominance.

If we have not deduced wrongly, this means the "inferior language" can emerge as the superstrate. Indeed, we do not have the details of the nature of the pidgin that existed from the contact between English and French at the time, but if the inferior language won in the struggle for dominance, why do we calibrate English (the assumed dominant language) as the superstrate language and the African languages (the assumed inferior languages) as the substrate languages in the evolution of NP? Our position in this paper is that the nature of NP and the dynamics of its development indicate that it evolved by the English contact group simplifying their language to occasion communication with the Nigerian contact group who, for the purpose of enforcing the communication, developed an interlanguage (pidgin) much described by the grammatical system of the local languages. Of course, we know that in a second language situation the phenomenon of interference (which is mother tongue based) has been identified as a strong factor in the output of learning, the mother tongue in this case being the local languages in contact with English.

In the section below, we outline some of the already identified grammatical system of NP towards demonstrating its nature and supporting our position which jettisons the superstrate/substrate dichotomy.

The nature of NP

The phonemic inventory of NP is made up of the sounds of the local languages. For instance, it lacks the dental fricatives and the diphthongs. This is evidently why Mafeni (1971:101) argues, rightly we think, for the adoption of the orthography of the indigenous languages in writing NP. Studies of the lexicon of NP have shown that it is not solely lexified by the European

languages, raising questions about the "lexifier superstrate" designation assigned to the European languages. Here are some examples from Mafeni (1971: 105-106):

(**1**)   wayo^N 'tricks' (Hausa origin)

yanga/nyanga^N 'vanity' (Hausa origin)

?ga^N 'master/superior' (Yoruba origin)

akara^N 'bean cake' (Yoruba origin)

konkonsa^N 'gossip/hypocrisy' (Twi origin)

oyibo^N 'white man/very light skinned person' (Yoruba origin)

jara^N 'bonus' (Hausa origin)

wahala^N 'trouble' (Hausa origin)

saraa^N 'sacrifice' (Hausa origin)

jaguda^N 'ruffian/rascal' (Yoruba origin)

Also included are the following:

(**2**)   amebo^N 'gossip' (Yoruba origin)

chei 'exclamation, meaning "goodness"' (Igbo origin)

dabaru^V 'spoil' (Hausa origin)

egunje^N 'bribe' (Yoruba orgin)

obioma^N 'mobile tailor' (Igbo origin)

wado 'greeting expression' (Urhobo origin)

kekere^ADJ 'small' (Yoruba origin)

una^PRO 'you' (Igbo origin)

kparakpo^N 'kinsman' (Yoruba origin)

?r?b?^ADJ 'fat' (Yoruba origin)

dagbo^V 'dupe' (Yoruba origin)

(cf. www.onlinenigeria.com/pidgin)

Others are:

(**3**)   chukuchuku^N 'thorn' (Urhobo origin)

de^AUX 'progressive marker' (Edo origin)

dé^V 'be – singular/plural' (Edo origin)

ikebe^N 'big buttocks' (Urhobo origin)

kamkpe^ADV 'strong and undisturbed' (Yoruba origin)

kpangolo^N 'tin container' (Edo origin)

na^V 'it is/is' (Edo origin)

wowo^ADJ 'ugly' (Edo origin)

yeye^ADJ 'stupid/useless' (Yekhee origin)

dede^V 'embrace' (Edo origin)

golo^V 'search/look for' (Edo origin)

igbe^N 'body' (Edo origin)

lele^V 'accompany/follow' (Edo origin)

abi 'isn't it' (Yoruba origin)

ajebota^N 'over pampered child' (Yoruba origin)

ajekpako^N 'a child from a poverty stricken home' (Yoruba origin)

molue^N 'big transit bus' (Yoruba origin)

ogbonge^ADJ 'sound/original' (Igbo origin)

abuna^N 'male or female genital organ' (Hausa origin)

(cf. Esizimetor, 2009 & 2011)

[where N (noun), V (verb), ADJ (adjective), ADV (adverb), AUX (auxiliary)]

Examples (1)-(3) show much nominal input from the local languages. There are however a few verbs and other words that belong to other word classes. We propose conversion as the morphological process that has created the words in NP. That is, the words are converted from the local languages into NP.

The conversion does not affect their word classes nor their grammatical features, so that for instance, the nouns do not take any inflections to mark number. They mark number by taking quantifiers, as   represented in the local languages of their origin:

(**4**) a. De molue dem dey jagajaga

the big-buses all   be rickety

'All the big buses are rickety'

b. *De molues dem dey jagajaga

Moreover, slangish introductions dot the lexicon:

(**5**) pèlè 'disappear fast or escape most quickly' (Elugbe and Omamor (1991:54) think that this derives from the name of the former Brazilian international footballer with a meaning connected with his speed on the pitch.)

dabo 'attack'

taka 'retaliate' (Elugbe and Omamor (op cit) comment that 'dabo' and 'taka' derive from Godwin Daboh and Joseph Tarka who were involved in swearing and counter-swearing)

Angola 'prison'

chickito 'pretty girl'

odeku 'big stout'

dundi 'fool'

econs 'stingy'

fashie 'ignore'

kpai 'die'

wa 'run to avert being arrested'

cowbell 'big breast'

akp? b?l? (akpu stomach) a man with a big stomach

atashment (attachment) extra passenger/lover of a married man

awe match (away match) an adulterous sexual affair outside a matrimonial home.

The NP lexicon is replete with reduplicated words which are representative of the systems of most Nigerian languages. For instance, Igbo is known to derive adverbial notion from other categories via reduplication:

(**6**) a. Ò biara   ?s?s?
S/he come-PAST run-run
'He/she came fast'

b. O riri   nri ya   nway?nway?
S/he eat-PAST food his/her slow-slow
'He/she ate his/her food gently (slowly)

Other examples of reduplication in NP are as follows:

(**7**)   h?ri h?ri[ADV] (hurry hurry) hurriedly, fast
k?na k?na[Adj] (corner corner) windy
k?na k?na[N] (corner corner) very secretive love officer
gbuma gbuma[Adj] (fat fat) a very fat person/a very majestic walk
meki meki[Adj] (make make) counterfeit
k?ti k?ti[N] (cut cut) made of bits and pieces
t?ku t?ku[N] (talk talk) lengthy/windy speech
t?ku t?ku[Adj] (talk talk) a loquacious person
kul? kul?[Adj] (cool cool) quietly
(cf. Mowarin, 2009)

As mentioned earlier, nouns in NP do not take inflections to mark number. That is, in the syntax of NP number is marked by a zero morpheme (see Elugbe and Omamor (1991:97) for more examples).

This also applies to the verbs, which do not vary in morphological form to express tense/aspect or number. Instead, they are expressed by lexical means or by context. For tense/aspect, we argue that some of the lexical items employed for this purpose are grammaticalizing or have grammaticalized as auxiliaries:

(**8**) I go kom

    I FUT-come

    I will come

    I de eat

    I PROG-eat

    I am eating

    I don go

    I PERF-go

    I have gone

[where FUT (future), PERF (perfective)]

For number, the linguistic context specifies whether the verb is singular or plural and this hinges on the number of the quantifier or demonstrative used with the subject:

(**9**) a. ? l de haus dia d?n fall

    all the house there have fall

    'All the houses there have fallen'

    b. De haus dia don fall

    the house there has fall

    the house there has fallen

Again, in yes/no questions, one would clearly see the syntax of the local languages, especially Igbo:

(**10**) a. Ó ga-abia

    S/he FUT-vp-come

    'He/she will come

    b. Ò ga-abia?

    s/he FUT-vp-come

    'Will he/she come?

[where vp (vowel prefix)]

Example (10) shows that Igbo yes/no questions are derived by a low tone. This is not the case in English, where the auxiliary is inverted with the subject:

(**11**) a. He will come

    b. Will he come

Evidently, the structure of (10) is parallel to the NP form:

(**12**) a. Ín go come

    S/he FUT come

    'He/she will come'

    b. Ìn go come?

    S/he FUT come

    'He/she will come?

What this means is that the grammatical function of tone, as evident in the local languages, also occurs in the NP. What is more, NP has some examples of ideophones, which are a feature of African languages:

(**13**) bámbám 'very beautiful'

    cháchá 'very new'

    dìmdìm 'sound of a bass guitar'

màgòmágó 'dishonest act'

smèsmè 'being unstable'

pòkòpòkò 'very soft or delicate'

dr?dr? 'tendon of meat,

yaghayagha 'disorderly'

(cf. Mowarin, 2009)

Indeed, there is copious literature showing that NP and other pidgins in West Africa incorporate the grammatical systems of the local languages and this is the evidence that the local languages form the matrix structure of the pidgins.

Conclusion

The NP typifies a pidgin that should not just be accounted for as Finney (2004), cited earlier, has done –an account with which many others have agreed. Faraclas recognises the peculiarities connected with this pidgin and warns against any attempt to fit NP into what is considered a 'classical' situation (1987):

The Nigerian situation affords us a rare opportunity to study the nativization of a pidginized/creolized language and it would be frivolous and unrealistic to discount the NP data because it is not the product of some "classical" situation which, if it ever could have existed at all, is highly unlikely to replicate itself.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991:57) adopt a similar position as Faraclas:

… given what was said earlier about the variety of roles played by NP, and its far from monocodal nature, if monocodality and drastic lexical or syntactic reduction typify 'pidgins', then we will have to conclude that NP is most certainly not a 'pidgin'.

The peculiarities account for our position that the local people, in encouraging the European visitors to communicate with them, learnt English as simplified by the Europeans themselves, and that they did so by indigenizing the language, which is why the grammatical systems of the local languages characterize it. This position may not be far from the universal principle of interference in second language learning where the target language/mother tongue distinction is used and not the more imperialistic superstrate (dominant) language/substrate languages criteria used in describing pidgins. In fact, we think that with the incontrovertible evidence that the so-called substrate languages of NP form the matrix structure of the language, there should be a reclassification of the local languages as the grammatical superstrate languages. Consequently, English may retain its status as the lexifier superstrate but add to the grammatical substrate in the same way as the local languages would add to their status that of lexifier substrate, that is, if the degree of lexifying is considered. Moreover, a more neutral reference to the languages forming the pidgin, which excludes colonial colouration or imperialism, could be generated. We endorse this option and, to achieve it, we recommend "Trace Languages (TLs)". Trace languages are therefore the languages whose grammatical and/or lexical traces are evident in a pidgin. The trace languages may be two or more. In the case of NP, they are more than two, English and the Nigerian languages.

Overall, the observation of Faraclas (1987) that NP is not a classical example of pidgin deserves attention. A corroborating fact is that NP is almost everything the local languages are. Hence, it is more intelligible to most Nigerians (especially those illiterate in English) than English. Egbe (1980:53) depicts this situation by reporting that in churches in Port Harcourt English is used and then interpreted in NP in a similar manner as English is used and interpreted in the local languages in the same context.

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