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**THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN: AN ANALYSIS OF THREE MINISTRY OF HEALTH PUBLIC HEALTH POSTERS**

Jane Nkechi Ifechelobi (PhD)

Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

**ABSTRACT**

Language is an invaluable gift to humankind by God. The primary purpose of every language, verbal or non-verbal, is communication. Nigerian Pidgin is an English-based Pidgin Language whose superstrate language is English while the indigenous languages serve as its substrate languages. Because no language is inferior to the other, in the midst of all the grudges many scholars bear against Nigerian Pidgin, this paper analyses the communicative function of Nigerian Pidgin in the light of its ubiquitous use in disseminating information to the general public. Data for this study comprised three advertorials by the Ministry of Health. Data were purposively chosen from advertorials that were pasted at Regina Caeli Specialist Hospital, Awka. This research discovers that Nigerian Pidgin is a language of wider communication that plays a huge communication role because it is spoken and understood by different people from different social classes.

**Keywords:** Language, English, Nigerian Pidgin, Communication, Indigenous languages

**INTRODUCTION**

Human language is a system of arbitrary symbols which human beings use to express thoughts, feelings, ideas and others. Human interaction is made possible through language. Languages are used for communication within the society that uses it. According to Stalin, “without a language understood by a society and common to all its members, that society must cease to produce, must disintegrate and cease to exist as a society.” (21) Adetugbo concurs: “all human societies and institutions are made possible only by man’s possession of language. In short, it is language that defines man’s humanity”. (1) Although there are prestige languages, no language is inferior to the other. When persons that speak different languages come in contact, it behoves them to find a common ground for communication. There is a natural tendency for them to seek ways of circumventing the communicative hindrance staring them in the face by developing a means of

communication. In order to foster relationship, a contact language is developed. In language contact situations, languages co-exist and adapt to themselves to produce sociolinguistic outcomes like bilingualism, multilingualism, borrowing, diglossia, codeswitching, codemixing, pidginisation, creolisation and decreolisation. A Pidgin language is a contact language.

### **Contact linguistics**

Most countries are multilingual and speakers of different languages interact and their languages influence each other. Language contact takes place when two or more languages interact whether psycholinguistically (a bilingual's brain) or sociolinguistically (in society/a speech community). Languages spoken by bilinguals influence each other in several ways as much as languages spoken in a society. The study of language contact is called contact linguistics. Contact linguistics studies the way languages influence one another when they co-exist especially when people that speak two or more languages/dialect interact. According to Winford,

Such contact can have a wide variety of linguistic outcomes. In some cases, it may result in only slight borrowing of vocabulary, while other contact situations may lead to the creation of entirely new languages. Between these two extremes lies a wide range of possible outcomes involving varying degrees of influence by one language on the other. More accurately, of course, it is the people speaking the respective languages who have contact with each other and who resort to varying forms of mixture of elements from the languages involved. The possible results of such contact differ according to two broad categories of factors – internal (linguistic) and external (social and psychological) (2)

In language contact situations, the interaction of languages can lead to language maintenance, language shift or the creation of a totally new language. In the birth of Pidgin languages, a totally new language is created out of the language contact situation.

### **Theories on the Origin of Pidgin**

#### **Baby-Talk Hypothesis**

This theory is of the view that Pidgins are as a result of an imperfect mastery of a language while in its initial stage, in the child with its first language and in the grown up with a second language learnt by imperfect methods, leads to a superficial knowledge of the most indispensable word, with total disregard to grammar. The general idea in baby-talk hypothesis is that people lack the ability to learn the standard languages with which the Pidgins are associated. This theory has been rejected by many linguists. John Holm opines that “Pidgins and Creoles are real languages, not baby talk. They are used for serious purposes.” (81)

Ronald Wardhaugh believes that “there is no evidence either for any ‘foreigner-talk’ or ‘baby-talk’ theory for the origin of Pidgins and Creoles, that is, that they result from Europeans simplifying their languages in order to communicate with others” (71). He further reiterates that,

Pidgins are not a kind of baby-talk used among adults because the simplified forms are the best that such people can manage. Pidgins have their own special rules, and, as we will see, very different Pidgins have a number of similarities that raise important theoretical issues having to do with their origins. (58)

### **Monogenetic/Relexification Hypothesis**

This theory lays claim to the fact that Pidgins’ underlying structural similarity is traceable to one common European source. It is based on historical evidence that points to the existence of a fifteenth century Portuguese Pidgin which is assumed to have been derived from an auxiliary language called Sabir that was used in the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages.

According to Wardhaugh,

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Portuguese relexified this language; that is, they introduced their own vocabulary into its grammatical structure, so that a Portuguese based Pidgin came into widespread use as a trade language. Later, this Pidgin was in turn relexified into Pidginised French, English and Spanish. (73)

### **The Nautical Jargon Theory**

This theory posits that sea farers, ocean travellers and navigators developed Pidgin as a matter of necessity. John Reinecke noted the possible influence of nautical Jargons on Pidgins. He is of the belief that the many voyages of discovery embarked on back then led to the development of a core vocabulary of nautical items and a simplified grammar. It asserts that the similarities among Pidgins and Creoles could be attributed to a common origin in the language of sailors.

Elugbe and Omamor state that,

The argument of the monogenetic/relexification theory is slightly similar to the one involved in the nautical Jargon hypothesis. Both views assume one origin for all Pidgins and essentially the same method of diffusion. (33)

### **The Independent Parallel Development Theory**

This theory is based on the well-acknowledged similarities between Pidgins. The argument is that the similarities which are known to exist between different Pidgins must be explainable in terms of the fact that:

- i. they are derived from Indo-European stock, i.e. they all have as one of the input languages some Indo-European language or the other
- ii. they all involve a good percentage of speakers who share “a common West African sub-stratum, and had to come to terms with similar physical and social conditions” (Elugbe and Omamor 32).

This theory opines that Pidgin evolved independently of any other language and that any similarity found between Pidgin and any language is a mere coincidence. The propounders point out that there are many features inherent in Pidgin that can attest to its independent status.

### **Universalist Theory**

This theory considers the similarities in Pidgin to be a result of universal tendencies among human beings to create similar languages, that is, a language with a simplified phonology, SVO syntax, and a lexicon that thrives on polysemy and reduplication. This theory is the most recent view on the origin of pidgins. The Universalist theory serves as the theoretical framework on which the pidginisation theory is hinged.

### **Origin of Nigerian Pidgin**

The Portuguese were the earliest known European visitors to Nigeria. According to Elugbe, “Nigerian Pidgin (NP) arose from contact between multilingual coastal communities of Nigeria and visiting European explorers/traders – first, the Portuguese, then, briefly, the Dutch; and, finally, the English. The Europeans had no language in common with the Nigerians.” (qtd in Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas 285) The first Nigerian population they had contact with was the coastal population of Niger Delta.

According to Ben Elugbe and Augusta Omamor,

The first contact situation between a Nigerian population and a European group was, therefore, between the Portuguese and the coastal peoples of the Niger Delta where the visitors found rivers up which they could navigate a little inland. We assume that some kind of trade jargon developed between the Portuguese and their Nigerian trading partners. Arising from this assumption is the question in

what kind of speech-form the Portuguese attempted to communicate with their hosts. It would be quite inviting to rush to the conclusion that the Portuguese at once resorted to the famed Portuguese-based Pidgin, the claimed ancestor of all European-based Pidgins. (3)

The multiplicity of languages in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria must have aided the implantation of “some kind of English” for the purpose of communication. Something must have happened after the Portuguese traders left Nigeria, because Nigerian Pidgin is English-based and not Portuguese –based.

### **Pidginisation, Creolisation and Decreolisation**

Pidginisation, simply put, is the birth of Pidgin languages. This sociolinguistic process called Pidginisation involves at least three languages, a superstrate (dominant) language and substrate languages. The superstrate language is usually a prestige language while the substrate languages are indigenous languages. The vocabulary of the emergent language is derived from the superstrate language while its grammar and phonology are formed from the substrate languages. This emergent language is called a Pidgin language. Pidgin languages are known for their simplified nature; they are spelt same way as they are pronounced. According to Hudson, “another requirement of a pidgin is that it should be as simple to learn as possible, especially for those who benefit least from learning it, and the consequence of this is that the vocabulary is generally based on the vocabulary of the dominant group.” (60) A Pidgin language is generally reduced “in the direction of whatever features are common to the languages of all those using the Pidgin, for mutual ease in use and comprehensibility, thus arriving at a kind of greatest common denominator” (Hall 25).

A Pidgin is either restricted or extended/expanded. A restricted Pidgin is a means to an end and dies out after the contact situation that gave rise to it has ended while an extended/expanded Pidgin lives on and could be creolized, decreolised or become an international language.

Nigerian Pidgin is an extended Pidgin. It is an English-based Pidgin whose superstrate language is the English language while its substrate languages are the indigenous languages in Nigeria. “The language of the superior people becomes the one on which the emerging Pidgin is based.” (Elugbe qtd in Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas 285)

Creolisation takes place when an extended Pidgin gains native speakers. Creole languages can be seen as languages that went from being Pidgin languages to getting nativised such that children speak them as their first languages. “A Pidgin which has acquired native speakers is called a CREOLE LANGUAGE, or CREOLE, and the process whereby a pidgin turns into a creole is

called ‘creolisation’”. (Hudson 63) In the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin has been creolised especially because of the multiplicity of languages in that area.

Creoles tend to lose their identities through decreolisation because if the source language of the creole has prestigial value, decreolisation is inevitable. In decreolisation, the Pidgin language becomes more like its source language especially when they exist side by side. According to Hudson,

Taking DECREOLISATION first, this is what happens when a creole is spoken in a country where other people speak the creole’s lexical source- language (for example, English). Since the latter has so much more prestige than the creole, creole speakers tend to shift towards it, producing a range of intermediate varieties. Sociolinguists call the creole the BASILECT and the prestige language the ACROLECT, with the intermediate varieties lumped together as MESOLECTS. This range of varieties spanning the gap between basilect and acrolect is called a ‘POST CREOLE CONTINUUM’(64)

### **The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria**

Many prescriptive linguists and persons, the world over, are prejudiced about Pidgin languages. Scholars are of the opinion that Pidgin languages belong to the uneducated in society. Nigerian Pidgin has been termed ‘a hybrid language’, ‘a makeshift language’, ‘motor park language’, ‘a debased language’, ‘an aberrant language’ and many others. Many people view Nigerian Pidgin as a substandard form of Standard English; a failed attempt at acquiring English.

Officially, English is the lingua franca in Nigeria. But another look at the definition of the concept lingua franca begs the question, which language is really the lingua franca in Nigeria? Lingua Francas are called bridge languages because they foster inter ethnic communication and relationships. Hudson defines a lingua franca as “a trade language widely spoken as a non-native language.” (7)

Keeping in mind that the English language is acquired through formal education, how many persons in Nigeria can boast of formal education? Among the educated, how many people can lay claim to a competent mastery of English? How do the educated interact with the uneducated that do not share same indigenous language with them?

According to Jane Ifechelobi and Chiagozie Ifechelobi,

The general idea in Nigeria is that the English language is our lingua franca yet it can only be truly acquired through formal education. Nigeria is the most populous

country in Africa, everybody cannot boast of formal education in Nigeria and less than ten percent of the masses possess a complete mastery of the English language. It is the language of the elite and does not cut across all walks of life. How can a language that got through formal education be the lingua franca in Nigeria? Can fifty percent of the populace boast of formal education? A lingua franca is meant to be spoken and understood by the majority of the populace. It must have a broad base of speakers.

Nigerian Pidgin has been gaining grounds in mass communication. Telecommunication companies, politicians, the Ministry of Health and many others have been exploring and harnessing the communicative power of Nigerian Pidgin by using it to disseminate information to the general public. They have come to the knowledge of the fact that Nigerian Pidgin, spoken by educated and uneducated Nigerians in different linguistic situations, serves as a language of wider communication; a linguistic bridge. Adverts in Nigerian Pidgin abound.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the popularity and use of Nigerian Pidgin, many people are still sceptical about the use of this Pidgin language. Many people have refused to accept Nigerian Pidgin as a contact language that emerged due to the dynamic nature of human languages. It is still relegated to the background. This language has been banned in homes by parents who still use it when the need for it arises. In the light of this negative attitude people have developed over years concerning Nigerian Pidgin, little or nothing has been done to find out if this neglected language can perform the chief function of every language which is communication. There is need to find out why Nigerian Pidgin is being employed by the Federal Government and private companies in disseminating information to the general public despite the 'bad language' tag it bears.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework on which the research is based is the co-operative principle as phrased by Grice which states,

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage which it occurs, by the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (qtd in Verschueren 32).

This theory describes how people interact with one another. Co-operative principle describes the effectiveness of communication as it is achieved in common social situations. This principle is based on four maxims of conversation namely – the maxim of quantity:

- i. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
- ii. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxim of quality

- i. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- ii. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of relation

- i. Be relevant

The maxim of manner

- i. Avoid obscurity of expression
- ii. Avoid ambiguity
- iii. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- iv. Be orderly (Johnstone 234).

These maxims “describe the particular expectations that shape how efficient, co-operative meaning-making is achieved” (Johnstone 235). The efficiency of these maxims in conversation is evident in speech acts that involve the mixing and switching of codes. In such cases, the interactants share an underlying assumption that they mutually speak the same languages. Grice believes that co-operative principle is the overarching principle in conversation.

**Data**

Data for this study comprises three World Health Organisation advertorials on Acute Flaccid Paralysis, Neo-natal Tetanus and Yellow Fever.

Acute Flaccid Paralysis

- Any pikin wey never reach 15years wey come get leg wey no fit stand for ground no matter wetin cause am. If you see any pikin or sick person wey get the symptoms wey we talk for up, make una call the number wey dey on top line sharp sharp. For more tori, make una waka go meet una LGA DSNO.



#### Neo-natal Tetanus

- Case definition - Any pikin wey dey suck and cry before but as from 3 to 28 days wey dem born am, **e no fit suck again plus e body come strong or e get convulsion.**

#### Yellow Fever

- Case definition – Any person wey e **body just start to dey hot** and e **com begin yellow for eye or bodi** inside two weeks wey the body first start to hot.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data will be analysed in line with Grice's co-operative principle which is the theoretical framework on which this research work is based.

#### **Data number one**

- Any pikin wey never reach 15years wey come get leg wey no fit stand for ground no matter wetin cause am. If you see any pikin or sick person wey get the symptoms wey we talk for up, make una call the number wey dey on top line sharp sharp. For more tori, make una waka go meet una LGA DSNO.

The all encompassing function of language is communication and co-operative principle considers the effectiveness of communication in social situation. The above data is an expose on acute flaccid paralysis by the World Health Organisation to Nigerians. The sentences above obey the maxims of quantity, quality relation and manner. The symptom of the disease is precisely put – *any pikin wey never reach 15 years wey come get leg wey no fit stand for ground no matter wetin cause am.* This obeys the maxims of quality and relation. The maxim of quantity is clearly obeyed in the second line - If you see any pikin or sick person wey get the symptoms wey we talk for up, make una call the number wey dey on top line sharp sharp. For more tori, make una waka go meet una LGA DSNO. This second sentence is quite informative and in order not to make it more informative than is required, interested persons are required to meet the DSNO in their local governments. Generally, Nigerian Pidgin is a simplified language and its use makes the sentence bereft of ambiguity and obscurity of expression.

#### **Data number two**

Case definition - Any pikin wey dey suck and cry before but as from 3 to 28 days wey dem born am, **e no fit suck again plus e body come strong or e get convulsion.**

The above sentence is a piece of information on the symptoms of neo-natal tetanus. The above sentence obeys the maxims of quality, relation and manner. Its brevity leads to the avoidance of prolixity thereby obeying the maxim of manner. The message to the general public by World Health Organisation is definitely not false and is very much relevant as mothers will be on the lookout for such symptoms in their neonates. The maxims of relation and quality are applicable here.

### **Data number three**

Case definition – Any person wey e **body just start to dey hot** and e **com begin yellow for eye or bodi** inside two weeks wey the body first start to hot.

The above sentence is information on the symptoms of yellow fever. This message is brief, concise and straight to the point. It is devoid of obscurity of expression, ambiguity. The maxims of manner and quantity have been applied here.

Grice's co-operative principle works with four maxims (quantity, quality, relation and manner) and these four maxims aim at effectiveness of communication. The use of Nigerian Pidgin, a language of wider communication, in disseminating these pieces of information on health issues to the general public helps achieve communication. Because health matters concern both the educated and uneducated, Nigerian Pidgin helps get the information to the target audiences.

### **CONCLUSION**

Nigerian Pidgin is not an aberrant form of Standard English. It is an English-based Pidgin whose superstrate language is the English language. It is ethnically neutral and is being spoken by Nigerians from different ethnic groups. Nigerian Pidgin is indigenous to Nigeria because it is grown, sustained and rapidly spreading in Nigeria.

As Elugbe succinctly puts it, "Naijiria Pidgin bi laik pikin we no get papa bot evribodi de sen am mesej." (qtd in Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas 284) Nigerian Pidgin has been relegated to the background because of its unofficial recognition but it is being employed in mass communication and advertising to fill a communication vacuum which the English language and indigenous languages cannot fill. According to Elugbe, "government agencies are gradually getting round to the position that, if the object is to reach as many Nigerians as possible, then Nigerian Pidgin is, at least, one of the languages to employ." (qtd in Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas 294)

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