

The Use of Pidgin English as a Medium of Social Discourse among Osun State University Students

Temitayo Amao

Osun State University

Osogbo, Nigeria

ayanbisi2001@yahoo.com

Abstract

This work examines the place of Nigerian Pidgin among Osun State University students in Nigeria with a view to drawing some generalizable conclusions regarding the use of pidgin among Nigerian university students. By analysing data from a descriptive survey involving 100 male and female students of the university, the paper seeks to find out the extent to which Nigerian Pidgin is used or spoken among the students of Osun State University and the significance of pidgin for the purpose of social interaction among the students. Thus, by conducting a case study of Osun State University, Osogbo, this present study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debates on the use of pidgin among students of Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Introduction

This work examines the place of Nigerian Pidgin among Osun State University students in Nigeria. The official acronym of the university is UNIOSUN. As at the time of its establishment in 2006, the university was the 30th state university and the 80th university in the Nigerian university system. It operates a collegiate-multi-campus system and runs various degree programmes distributed across its eight colleges. It currently has a population of about 6000 students spread among its six campuses. An easily discernible trend among the students of UNIOSUN is the widespread use of pidgin as a medium of social discourse. This piece therefore deems it proper to examine this phenomenon with a view to drawing some generalizable conclusions regarding the use of pidgin among Nigerian university students.

The present study involves 100 male and female students of the university, randomly selected (50 each) from the College of Science and Engineering Technology, Osogbo Campus and the College of Humanities and Culture, Ikire Campus. Essentially, the paper seeks to find out the extent to which Nigerian Pidgin is used or spoken among the students of Osun State University and its significance for the purpose of social interaction among the students. In order to achieve its objectives, the paper is divided into several major parts. The first part introduces the discussion and provides the necessary background information. Part two concentrates on the evolution of pidgin and its place within Nigerian contemporary society. This part also provides an overview of related literature. The third part explains the procedures and research methods employed in carrying out the descriptive survey, while part four analyses the data gathered for the study and tries to answer the study's main research questions. The last part concludes the essay.

The study aligns itself with the contention that the true position occupied by Nigerian Pidgin in the different sectors of society must first be established empirically, before any clamour for the recognition of the language as Nigeria's official language or lingua franca could receive

any meaningful audience from the appropriate governmental quarters. It is against this backdrop, and in an attempt to fill part of this gap, that the present study examines the use of pidgin among Osun State University students.

Thus, by conducting a case study of Osun State University, Osogbo, this present study contributes to the ongoing scholarly debates on the use of pidgin among students of Nigerian tertiary institutions. Consequently, the study seeks to achieve the following major objectives:

1. To determine the frequency or otherwise of the use of Nigerian Pidgin among the students of Osun State University.
2. To find out the significance of Nigerian Pidgin for social interaction among Osun State University students.
3. To discover the significance of Nigerian Pidgin for purposes other than social interaction among students of Osun State University.

The Evolution of Pidgin as a Form of Language

The linguistic status as well as social acceptability of pidgin as a form of language has changed dramatically over the century. A language-form once held as *bastardized* (Holm 2000), and for that reason unacceptable, disapproved, and shunned in so many spheres of society, would appear to have eventually shed its dark cloak and emerged as a people's linguistic sweetheart. This state of affairs finds corroboration in the preponderance of research that has suffused the academic terrain on Pidgin (both in Nigerian and other similar contexts). For example Holm (2000), *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*, attempts a comprehensive evaluation of important aspects of Pidgin and Creole languages, ranging from the relationship over time between the languages, on the one hand, and linguistics (the branch of learning whose object ought to be the study of languages from an analytical, empirical and scientific point of view), to such other fundamental aspects of the language as the intricacies of terminology and the development of theory. This remarkable interest attests to the new-found friendship between linguistics and pidgin languages. Globally, several social or socio-cultural factors have also culminated in the proliferation of varieties of pidgin and creole languages in the wider world. Consequently, other linguistic aspects of the pervasive pidgin phenomenon such as Lexicosemantics, Phonology and Syntax are now flourishing.

Holm (Ibid; 1) therefore remarks that “what earlier generations thought of pidgin and creole languages is all too clear from their very names: *broken English, bastard Portuguese, nigger French, kumbuuistaaltje* (‘cookhouse lingo’), *isikulu* (‘coolie language’)”, and so on. He further acknowledges that the seeming “contempt” towards pidgins, initially, “often stemmed in part from the feeling that pidgins and creoles were corruptions of ‘higher’, usually European languages, and in part from attitudes towards the speakers of such languages who were often perceived as semi-savages whose partial acquisition of civilized habits was somehow an affront”. To corroborate the logic of Holm in the forgoing discussion, as regards the initial attitudes towards pidgin and creole languages, the following excerpt from Aleksandra (2009; 1) is available:

The study of pidgin and creole phenomena has long been neglected in linguistics. The study attracted interest in the late 1960s. Previously they were referred to as “marginal languages” (Reinecke 1938: 107). The discussed languages were considered for a very long

time to be slave talk [di Patwa or patois] (Patrick 1995: 227), uneducated languages, and “were to be avoided”.

The Place of Pidgin in Contemporary Nigerian Society

It is important to acknowledge the fact that Holm does not stand alone in the initial crusade for (the recognition of) pidgin languages alongside other major types of languages, and specifically as encountered in Nigeria, i.e. Nigerian Pidgin. A good deal of linguists and research works fall within this trend-setting category, in the Nigerian context; And, as the 21st century unfolds, the second part of its opening decade has witnessed an even larger influx of research on the subject-matter, including works such as Ihemere (2006) *A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin*; Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2010) *The Sociolinguistics of Nigerian Pidgin English in Selected University Campuses in Nigeria*; Iwuchukwu & Okafor (2011) *Nigerian Pidgin in the 21st Century: Any Hope of Surviving the Opposition from English, Nigerian Languages and Foreign Languages?*; Ativie (2012) *Cultural Influences as Inputs of Development of Nigeria Pidgin*; Mazzoli (2012) *The Emergence of ‘Na’ as a Copula in Nigerian Pidgin*; and so on.

A closer look at the existing literature on Nigerian Pidgin as highlighted above would however reveal two major pre-occupational trends (among the different scholars): the first is the effort to emphasize or articulate the importance of pidgin (concurrent with which is the advocacy for its upgrading as recognized lingua franca among Nigeria’s multiplex ethnicities; and the second is the daring attempt to regularize its form and structure by subjecting it to rigorous linguistic analysis. To illustrate the first research trend above, Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2010) “investigated varieties of Nigerian Pidgin with special focus on the variety being used on the Nigerian university campuses”. He expressed the view that “over the years, Nigerian Pidgin has expanded, stabilized and probably creolized”. In his reasoned opinion, this is probably due to the fact that, at times, “linguistic resources like borrowing and coinage are resorted to in-order to cope with day-to-day emerging functions and concepts”. For example, the word *solo* (a coinage used to mean ‘calm down’) was cited to illustrate that such words (and there are many similar others) “are introduced by Nigerian youths on campuses as well as by hoodlums in the society to swell-up the lexical register of pidgin typologies”. Abdullahi-Idiagbon (Ibid) therefore highlights the common functions of Pidgin expressions to include the following, that it is used: (i) to herald musical concert of interest within or outside [the] campuses, (ii) to womanize or talk about ladies or ladies discussing their male friends, (iii) to express basic domestic needs like eating and clothing, and (iv) for interpersonal/private discussion.

Furthermore, Ajibade, Awopetu & Adeyemi (2012) examine Nigerian youth’s perception in relation to Nigerian Pidgin. The major question they sought to answer was: what do Nigerian youths think or make of pidgin as a linguistic choice available to them in their everyday language-based interrelationship. “To accomplish this”, in their own words, “the study investigated the influence of tribe, institution, age, location, sex and social status on the youths’ perceptions of pidgin ... as a unifying /factor, and its consideration as a recognized official language in the Nigerian language policy”.

It must be stated from the outset that in a bid to examine the position occupied by pidgin (Nig.P) among students of Osun State University, this study finds it expedient to attempt

some illustrative comparisons involving other languages available to the students, such as English (the current language of instruction) and other Nigerian local languages (mother-tongues). However, considerations other than those aimed at investigating the level of importance or significance, or the degree of necessity attributed to the language, i.e. Nig.P., by the students, was deemed to have gone outside of the scope of this study. The emphasis is on the pragmatic and objective measure of *need* or *requirement* associated with the language among the students, and not on their subjective or value-laden attitudes towards it. In other words, a distinction, for the purpose of this study, has been made between the question ‘do the students feel, have and demonstrate a significant need for Nigerian Pidgin?’ and ‘do the students feel strongly, enthusiastic or passionate about it?’ The logic here is that, a second language learner of French (or even English) may feel strongly about the language but not have any real practical needs for it, and so not actively engaged in the everyday use of it, in which case the language would take an inferior place in relation to other languages spoken by that person. It was based on this logic that considerations of the place of Nigerian Pidgin among the students was, basically, held or taken to constitute the major scope of this study. It is hoped that the findings from this study will, to a large extent, tally with findings from other universities and tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Therefore, most scholars (Jowitt, 1991; Faraclas, 1996; Egbokhare, 2003 & Igboanusi, 2008), agree that Pidgin is not just some ‘distorted’ or ‘bastardized’ form of language, as some would think, and which perhaps makes them refer to it as *Broken*, but that *Pidgin* is a complete language in its own right. Therefore, the term *Pidgin* in its abstract sense refers to a linguistic concept, not to be seen as a variety of any language until one begins to talk of the linguistic components of *Pidgin* in one particular context, i.e. in terms of the languages from which it has been formed, or in terms of what Holm (2000) and others refer to as its *substrate* and *superstrate* languages.

According to Mensah (2011), some of the explanations put forward in support of *Pidgin English* as being a sort of distortion of standard English, is that discourse-pragmatics is an imperative factor in understanding both the lexical and structural borrowings that characterize usages in Pidgin English, and that Nigerian Pidgin on the other hand is replete with adequate descriptive, prescriptive and grammatical forms. According to Iwuchukwu and Okafor (2012), Nigeria’s multi lingual background provides a veritable ground for the emergence of Nigerian pidgin as a formidable national language. But yet Nigerian Pidgin remains a marginal language.

Another level at which Nigerian Pidgin registers its way is the Nigerian music scene, particularly with the emerging Naija pop culture. Here, Fasan (2010) notes that Nigerian Pidgin is a predominant language of expression and a form of solidarity or mark of identity among the various multi-ethnic groups of young people who crave to create effective urban culture in their respective locations. It is also acknowledged as a formidable stride in the recreation of Nigerian and African socio-cultural identity. This level of prominence carries over into the religious terrain in Nigeria, especially in Christian Pentecostal circles, characterizing most urban centers, as well as into the Nigerian film-making industry where the language enjoys unrestricted use, mirroring the way of life of Nigerian people. The foregoing serves to highlight the perceived and observable place of Nigerian pidgin in contemporary Nigerian society. The implication of this is that if enough research work that is commensurate with the

rapid rate of growth and influence associated with the language is carried out, Nigerian Pidgin may well receive more audience from the government and secure a better place in Nigeria's language policy in the nearest future.

The tables below illustrate some salient features of contemporary Nigerian Pidgin. Specifically, it identifies some superstrate and substrate influences on Nigerian Pidgin, as well as instances of reduplication, compounding and clipping in Nigerian Pidgin.

Table 1: Superstrate and Substrate influences on NP

Lexical source	NP Lexical Item	NP Meaning
English	pálè veks maintain obstacle remote control	pal/friend vex be calm meat witchcraft
Portuguese	Palava pikin dash sabi brusai	problem/trouble child gift know flirt
French	Bókù kámpé pantalun rundevu	Plenty fine/durable bogus pair of trousers reckless spending
Nigerian English	go slow machine watchnight houseboy upstair	hold up motorcycle/new car night watch man male servant storey building
Igbo	Ókóró ínyángá ògógóró ogbánjé	an Igbo man show off locally brewed gin reincarnated birth

Table 2: Reduplication in Nigerian Pidgin

Nig.P Reduplication	English base
small small	'gently'
wélu wélu	'very well'
kúlú kúlú	'calmly'
sharp sharp	'fastly'
kwík kwík	'urgently'
mágo mágo	'deceitful'
wúru wúru	'unfaithful/deceitful'
jágá jágá	'confusable'

Table 3: Compounding in Nigerian Pidgin

Nig.P Compound Words	Semantic Equivalent in English
long throat	‘glutton’
bad belle	‘jealousy/envy’
busy-body	‘loquaciousness’
strong head	‘stubbornness’
God pikin	‘Christian’
house boy	‘male servant’
baby girl/boy	‘girl/boy friend’
country people	‘the masses’
basket mouth	‘a talkative’
woman wrapper	‘weakling (a man)’
coconut head	‘dunce’
pure water	‘cheap/mass produced goods’
i get mouth	‘boast’
make eye	‘wink’
hear word	listen’
tear race	‘run’
fear face	‘respect’

Table 4: Clipping in Nigerian English

Clipped Words in Nigerian Pidgin	Semantic Equivalent in English
Pány	‘palm wine’
Demo	‘show off or use style on someone’
Cáf	‘cafeteria’
Náijá	‘Nigeria’
Acada	‘academic’
Mómó	‘(early) morning’
Bros	‘brother’

Research Methodology

As noted earlier, this study primarily investigates the place of pidgin among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study adopted Osun State University as the study area, and it was within this study area that a representative population was surveyed for information regarding the (independent) variable, which was the level of significance attached to the language (pidgin) among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. At the end of the survey, involving the elicitation of relevant facts and information, the data obtained from the field by administering the research instrument to the students were subjected to detailed analysis.

Out of the entire six campuses of Osun State University, two (2) campuses were selected purposively to represent the University. The selected campuses are Osogbo (main) campus, and the Ikire campus of the University. Data required for the analysis were obtained from the two campuses named above, by administering the research instrument to the students using the simple random sampling technique. The instrument, named the Place of Pidgin among Undergraduate Students (PPUS) questionnaire, was a simple closed-ended instrument

employed in eliciting information required to establish the level of importance or otherwise associated with pidgin among students of Osun State University, and by inference, students of other tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

The PPUS questionnaire was administered in Osogbo and Ikire campuses of the Osun State University. The two campuses were visited in turns. The procedure (i.e. data collection procedure), was carried out with the aid of three (3) research assistants, and by visiting the different locations on campus as well as off-campus: such as the lecture rooms (when lectures were not going on), the cafeterias, the College libraries, the ICT halls, and the students' halls of residence on and off-campus. The intention was to spread the random collection process across not just the various lecture halls but also a range of other locations where students were normally found to be hanging out. The PPUS questionnaire identified three categories of *Yes* (for regular speakers), *No* (for non-speakers), and *Sometimes* (for those who speak the language only tentatively). At the end of the analysis, logical deductions and conclusion were drawn in response to the research problems stated earlier, while appropriate recommendations were also made.

Analysis of Findings

Table 4.1 Use of NP in the Classroom When No Lectures Are Going On

In-Class NP Users	Osogbo	100%	Ikire	100%
Regular Users (/50)	21	42%	22	44%
Tentative Users (/50)	09	18%	14	28%
Regular and Tentative (/50)	30	60%	36	72%
Non-Users (/50)	18	36%	13	26%
Blank Questionnaire Columns	02	04%	01	02%

The above table (4.1) reveals that for Osogbo and Ikire campuses respectively, although a remarkable 60% and 72% of the sampled population often speak Nigerian Pidgin in the classroom, only 42% and 44% of that population respectively speak the language on a regular basis in the classroom when lectures are not going on.

Table 4.2 Use of NP among Friends on Campus

On-Campus NP Users	Osogbo	100%	Ikire	100%
Regular Users (/50)	24	48%	23	46%
Tentative Users (/50)	12	24%	15	30%

Regular and Tentative (/50)	36	72%	38	76%
Non-Users (/50)	12	24%	10	20%
Blank Questionnaire Columns	02	04%	02	04%

As shown in the table above, 72% for Osogbo and 76% for Ikire are recorded as the population of students who speak the language to their friends on campus whether regularly or tentatively. Of this total population, however, only 48% for Osogbo and 46% for Ikire speak the language regularly to or with their friends on campus.

Table 4.3 Usefulness of NP for Social Interaction among UNIOSUN Students

Response Category	Osogbo	100%	Ikire	100%
Positive Responses (/50)	20	40%	20	40%
Tentative Responses (/50)	11	22%	09	18%
Positive and Tentative (/50)	31	62%	29	58%
Negative Responses (/50)	17	34%	20	40%
Blank Questionnaire Columns	02	04%	01	02%

The above table (4.3) measures the level of usefulness attached to Nigerian Pidgin for social interaction among the sampled students of Osun State University. Some believed Nigerian Pidgin is definitely useful for social interaction in Nigeria, while others are uncertain, thus believing that the language is useful for social interaction only in certain occasions (i.e. sometimes). The combination of these two (2) responses (i.e. whether the one is true or the other is true), was measured to be 62% for Osogbo and 58% for Ikire respectively. Similarly, the population of students who believed that Nigerian Pidgin is definitely NOT significant for social interaction among UNIOSUN students was measured at 34% and 40% respectively.

Table 4.4 Perception of Role Played by NP among UNIOSUN Students

Response Category	Osogbo	100%	Ikire	100%
Positive Responses (/50)	20	40%	16	32%
Tentative Responses (/50)	06	12%	07	14%
Positive and Tentative (/50)	26	52%	23	46%

Negative Responses (/50)	22	44%	24	48%
Blank Questionnaire Columns	02	04%	03	06%

The above measure of students’ perception of the role played by NP among UNIOSUN students reveals a very low significance. Even the combination of all responses beside Negative Responses comes as low as 46% for Ikire campus, while it is 52%, barely above average, for Osogbo campus. Negative Responses alone here take a handsome slash away from the entire sum of responses. Therefore, the population of students who believed that Nigerian Pidgin plays an important role among students in the individual campuses was calculated at 40% for Osogbo and 32% for Ikire respectively.

Considering the sequence of results obtained for the four different categories above therefore, i.e., it was found that less than 50% of the sampled population: (only 42% & 44% respectively) speak NP regularly in the classroom when no lectures are going on; (48% & 46% respectively) speak NP regularly to their friends on campus in general; (40% respectively) find NP definitely useful for social interaction among UNIOSUN students, while (40% & 32% respectively) think NP definitely plays an important role among students in each of Osogbo and Ikire campuses of Osun State University.

Moreover, table 5 below indicates the number and category of Nigerian pidgin speakers among the students of Osun State University. The data analysis shows that there is no significant difference in the results obtained for both Osogbo and Ikire campuses of the University.

Table 5: Number and Category of NP Speakers among the Sampled Population

NP Speaker Category	Osogbo	100%	Ikire	100%
Regular NP Speakers (/50)	28	56%	26	52%
Tentative NP Speakers (/50)	14	28%	19	38%
Regular and Tentative (/50)	42	84%	45	90%
Non-NP-Speakers (/50)	08	16%	05	10%

Furthermore, 84% and 90% of the students from Osogbo and Ikire respectively claim they speak Nigerian pidgin generally (i.e. whether regularly or tentatively). Out of these, only a minimal 16% and 10% respectively claim not to speak Nigerian pidgin at all. Of the 84% and 90% who speak the language generally, a remarkable difference exists for: (i) those who speak the language regularly (i.e. who are aware and sure of their own active everyday use of it, and (ii) those who speak the language tentatively (i.e. who may not particularly remember themselves being actively engaged in the everyday speaking of Nigerian pidgin, but who acknowledge that they must have spoken it at one point or the other anyway, i.e. sometimes).

The study further reveals that at least three different categories of speakers of Nigerian pidgin exist in Osun State University, and by extension, among Nigerian undergraduate students: (i.) those who speak the language regularly (i.e. who perhaps choose the language during

everyday conversation virtually by default), (ii.) those who only speak the language tentatively (i.e. who merely picks it here and there when the context permits), and (iii.) those who do not speak the language at all).

Interestingly, these findings are quite illustrative of what obtains in most student communities, where only a little minority can claim that they do not speak pidgin at all. However, what is quite revealing is that out of the large population of NP speakers in both of Osogbo and Ikire as stated above, a remarkable 28% and 30% respectively speak the language at least tentatively. This leaves us with about half of the entire population of the students, 56% and 52% respectively, being regular speakers of Nigerian pidgin.

Conclusion

This study examined the place of pidgin among tertiary institution students in Nigeria by conducting a case study of Osun State University. It was examined against the background of the generalization that, the Nigerian Pidgin today although relegated to the margins, possesses all that it takes to be Nigeria's lingua franca and official language. In order to provide the appropriate theoretical background for the analysis the paper engages with the prevailing literature on Nigerian Pidgin. Tables of processed data which served to show the various distributions of variables and frequencies were provided and for each section of the analysis, qualitative interpretations of the behaviour of data were provided to further clarify and answer each of the research questions. It is important to point out that the discourse of pidgin continues to gain steady momentum in Nigeria. This is so much so that the advocacy for the language to be accorded a place in the country's national language policy continues to gain more adherents by the day. The recommendation of this study is therefore that such advocacy would be more credible if it is based on empirical research findings. For example, the current researcher shares the view that pidgins and precisely, Nigerian Pidgin, has hidden potentials which even linguists are yet to chart. Indeed, given the appropriate enabling environment to develop, Nigerian Pidgin may evolve itself into a viable national language which helps to achieve a number of purposes other than the social and commercial.

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