

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE ADOPTION OF PIDGIN AS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Chief Y.A. Babatunde,

Abstract

This paper investigated students' perception of the adoption of Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria. It was the assumption of the researcher that the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria could lead to its acceptance as the national language. One hundred and fifty two students of University of Nigeria- Nsukka and Enugu campuses - were randomly sampled. The sample cut across the major ethnic groups in the country and thirty-six minority language speakers. A 25-item questionnaire was designed for the study. Simple percentage was used in the analysis of the data collected, while the free comments of the informants were carefully examined. Majority of the informants objected to the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as Nigeria's official language. It was suggested that an enlightenment programme should be mounted by the Federal Government and language planners on the status of Nigerian Pidgin as an independent language variety since the findings of the study showed that the informants objected to the adoption of the variety because of their lack of knowledge about its independence, structure, phonology, vocabulary, etc.

Introduction

The fact has been acknowledged that Nigeria, being a multicultural and multilingual society, has a language problem (Sofunke, 1990; Elugbe, 1990; Ofuokvuu 1990). English, as Elugbe (1990) suggests, is one of Nigeria's lingua franca. It is also the official language of administration, business, secondary and tertiary education, etc. English is not an indigenous Nigerian language. People often make the mistake of regarding English as a national language, yet the percentage of people that can communicate with it is as low as 10 (ten). An indigenous language is needed to function as the country's official language.

However, there is the problem of adopting one of the indigenous language varieties as the country's official language. None of the earlier proposals as shown by Sofunke (1990) is acceptable to Nigerians. His own proposal that Igala should be chosen as the country's national language lacks merit. For him, the language indicates strong linguistic and/or cultural links with three major ethnic zones. His extension of the language, for example, to the defunct Bendel State does not suggest its cultural link with the Yoruba people. It must be stated, therefore, that a more culturally politically neutral language in the country is needed. It was for this reason that the researcher surveyed the opinions of students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Enugu campuses with different linguistic backgrounds on the adoption of Nigerian pidgin as an official language in Nigeria. It was the researcher's assumption that from its adoption as an official language it could become the country's national language when standardized.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria as a politically independent nation needs to be culturally independent. It is unfortunate that forty - four years after her existence as a sovereign nation she is tied to the pron string of her colonial masters by language, the English language still plays the role of an official language in the country to the extent that some people believe erroneously, as hinted earlier, that it has come to stay as the national language of the country.

There have been many proposals (Simpson, 1978; Osaji, 1979; Olagoke, 1982; Sofunke, 1990) towards the development or selection of a variety as Nigeria's national language. Success has not been recorded because the country is a multicultural and multilingual society. The adoption or development of an indigenous language is generally fraught with problems.

There is, therefore, the problem of evolving a national language that will be acceptable to the generality of Nigerian people; a language that is seen to be culturally and politically neutral. Nigerian pidgin meets this criterion, for it is seen to be politically neutral.

According to Mafeni (1971), it has a structure of its own with similarities at certain levels and in varying degrees to English and the various substrates. It is, therefore, the focus of this study to investigate the perception of students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Enugu campuses, on its adoption as an official language in Nigeria with a view to adopting it later as the national language, thereby resolving the national language question.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to find out the perception of students of University of Nigeria, both at Nsukka and Enugu campuses about the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria. It was the assumption of the researcher that if people's perception of the variety was positive, it would facilitate its standardization. By virtue of this standardization and its status as an official language, it could gradually become the national language of Nigeria, thus laying to rest the disaffection that this has generated and thereby fostering unity among the various ethnic groups in the country.

Methodology

The study was a descriptive survey. The population consisted of the students of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. As in a similar study by the researcher, one hundred and fifty two students were randomly sampled considering the three major linguistic groups in Nigeria: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and minority language speakers. The sample consisted of 42 Yoruba speakers, 65 Igbo speakers, 9 Hausa speakers and 36 minority language speakers. The minority language group comprised Ishan (2), Urhobo (4), Efik (1), Edo (6), Idoma(1), Ogoni (1), Igala (4), Itsekiri (1), Nupe (3), Bvull (1), Oworo (2), Kaje-Bajju (1), Ukwuani (1), Ibibio (3), Babur (1), Tiv (1) and Nembe (1). Two of the minority language speakers did not however state their linguistic background.

Instrument

A 25 - item questionnaire was designed for the purpose of the study. All the items were related and aimed at eliciting the responses of the informants with regard to their perception of the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher himself to the informants both at Nsukka and Enugu campuses of University of Nigeria.

Simple percentage was used in analyzing the data collected in respect of the research question, while the free comments of the informants were carefully examined.

Results

The results of the analysis of the data collected are presented in this section. A summary of the free comments of the informants is attempted to show the direction of the results of the study.

Summary of Informants' Free Comments

Opinions were diverse as regards the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria. There were arguments for and against it as shown by the comments of the informants. While some informants felt its adoption was a welcome development, others saw it as a mark of underdevelopment and cultural imperialism among other things.

Arguments for the Adoption of Pidgin

The informants who supported the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin put forward a number of arguments. Divergent opinions were expressed for its adoption. For some, the adoption of the language could foster unity among the various ethnic groups in the country. It was believed that the language was capable of bridging the communication gap among the citizens of Nigeria. Some informants' responses showed that the language could be easily learnt - earlier to learn than English. It could be learnt both by the literate and illiterate in Nigeria. According to this view, its adoption would facilitate effective communication among the various ethnic groups in the country. Reference was made to its effective use both by the electronic and print media. Another group of informants supported the idea of using Pidgin only for internal communication. They felt it should be adopted, but that its use should be restricted to Nigeria. The informants argued that for the language to

'preserve its uniqueness, Nigerian Pidgin should retain its local touch because it is this quality that favours the language'. Its adoption, however, according to some informants, would give the country an identity.

It was the argument of some people that it could be adopted as the country's official language, but that its use should not be 'enforced'. In other words, the use of the language should not be mandatory. People should be allowed to use it at will. A similar argument was that it could be adopted as an official language, but should not be seen as a lingua franca.

Despite the fact that some informants felt that the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language would be energy, time and money - consuming, they were of the opinion that it should be adopted since, according to them, no Nigerian language had been willingly 'embraced' and 'learnt' like Pidgin.

Some informants argued that Pidgin should be adopted because it encouraged radicalism. It was seen as the language of the radicals.

It was also suggested that it could be adopted, but that its development should be gradual. Some informants felt it should be adopted, but used with English.

Arguments Against Its Adoption

However, there were more arguments against its adoption than for it. It was the contention of some informants that the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as the country's official language could cause disunity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Salient among the reasons advanced for that was that its use was restricted to the south and that it could be said to have originated from this part of the country. Another was that it was a language like any of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba whose adoption could bring disharmony.

Some informants felt that the standardization of pidgin would cost the government a huge amount of money. It was argued that the money and energy that would be devoted to making Nigerian Pidgin an official language should be channeled into making the 'standard English language' more acceptable to Nigerians. It was believed that the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin would do more harm to the educational system than improve it. It was argued that it would lower the standard of English usage among school children. It would 'corrupt and distort good English grammar rather than enrich it'.

Some informants saw the Nigerian Pidgin as a language that could be associated with the colonial masters and thus its adoption would amount to cultural imperialism.

It was argued by some too that the adoption of Pidgin would 'cut Nigeria from the rest of the world'. One of the reasons advanced for this was that it lacked international acceptability. Allied to this view was that the language was not standardized. It was argued that if a language such as this was adopted it would cause the country a setback. The opinion was strong among some informants that it was an inferior language, a language which depicted 'linguistic peasantry'. It was described as 'a close neighbour of ghetto code'. It was the view of this group that Nigerian Pidgin should be used to 'communicate matters of shallow interest to the illiterate masses'. Its adoption would make the international community see Nigerians as 'headless individuals'.

One argument against the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria was that the varieties of the language were as many as the language varieties in the country. The fear was expressed as to which of the varieties would be adopted.

Majority of those who proffered arguments against the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin suggested that an indigenous Nigerian language should be adopted. This has the presupposition that for this group of people Pidgin is alien to Nigeria.

Research Question

Will students' perception be negative or positive on the adoption of Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria?

The summary of the analysis of informants' responses in relation to this question is presented in the table below'.

Nigeria

	Sex	Number of Informants	Number of Responses	Percentage
Yes	Male	127	1160	30.53
	Female	25	118	3.11
	Total	152	1278	33.63
No	Male	127	2015	53.03
	Female	25	507	13.34
	Total	152	2522	66.37
Overall Total		152	3800	100

Responses of Informants in Percentage to the Adoption of Pidgin as an Official Language in

This table shows that 152 informants' opinions were surveyed. The breakdown was 127 male informants and 25 female informants. The frequency count for 'YES' responses was 1,278, representing a percentage of 33.63. On the other hand, for 'NO' it was 2,522, representing 66.27 per cent. A breakdown of the responses shows that the frequency count of 'YES' responses for male informants was 1160, while it was 118 for female informants. The percentage was 30.53 for male informants and 3.11 for female informants. The breakdown equally shows that the frequency count of 'NO' responses for male informants was 2015, representing 53.03 of the total responses, and 507 for female informants, that is a percentage response of 13.34. The result shows that the informants, whether male or female, did not endorse the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria.

Discussion

The above table shows that the frequency count for 'Yes' responses for both male and female informants was 1278, representing 33.63 per cent as against the frequency count of 2,522 for 'No' responses. With the percentage of the latter as 66.37 it is very glaring that the informants did not support the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as an official language in Nigeria.

Some of the informants as shown earlier felt that the adoption of the language would not foster unity among the various ethnic groups, citing the situation in the Middle East. They argued that despite the fact that the Arabs had one language they had never seen peace. Some informants argued that the language, that is, Nigerian Pidgin was restricted to the south and that its adoption would mean superposing a variety on Nigerians. It was the contention of some as well that its adoption would cost the country a huge amount of money. This was in relation to its standardization. It was also argued that its adoption meant cultural dependence.

Some informants felt the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin, as the country's official language would 'cut us from the rest of the world'. It would not make international communication easy.

It was the argument of some informants that Nigerian Pidgin would 'corrupt and distort good English grammar rather than enrich it'. They felt it should not be introduced as the language of instruction in schools.

It was argued also that the language would lose its local touch if adopted and standardized. What this means is that it would be out of the reach of the rural dwellers and the illiterates who in some parts of the country have access to the language now.

The opinion was strong among the informants that the language had a 'regional origin' and the adoption would create a problem. The argument was that it would be another source of 'disaffection'. Akin to this was the argument that the language had different varieties. The question was then which of the varieties would be adopted.

Some informants felt that the country had a number of problems that required a solution rather than the adoption of Pidgin. They argued that Nigeria should focus its attention on internal unity and how- to revamp the economy instead of the adoption of a language that was not standardized - a language of the peasants, an inferior language.

From the above it is clear why the informants did not want Nigerian Pidgin to be adopted as the country's official language. A cursory look at the issues raised would show that some of the

the

arguments were hinged on ignorance, although some genuine ones were proffered. The argument that the adoption of the language would mean 'cultural dependence' emanated from the belief that Pidgin could be regarded as a variety of English. Even the notion of the language as depicting linguistic 'peasantry' and its inferiority to other national languages arose from the same belief. It is wrong to regard Nigerian Pidgin as a variety of English. It is an independent language variety- a variety in its own-right. The point one is trying to make here is that the language's rejection by the informants was based partly on ignorance as shown by their comments.

The argument that the adoption of the language would cost the country a huge amount of money was tenable.

Implications of the Study

The results of this study have implications for language planners and the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As shown by the comments of the informants, Nigerian Pidgin was rejected as an official language partly because of ignorance and partly because of the negative attitudes of the informants to it. It then means not much has been done by government and linguists to educate people about the various indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Some of the informants who endorsed the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin suggested that it should co-exist with English. It was suggested that the Nigerian Pidgin should be used for internal communication, whereas English should be the language of international communication. This suggestion was based on the fact that the language was not standardized. Again, this implies that the public needs enlightenment on the process of standardizing a language like Nigerian Pidgin. Should the language be adopted by all and sundry, work could start on its standardization.

Recommendations

Since the language was rejected not because the informants felt that there was something inherently wrong with it members of the general public need to be enlightened as a number of people may have aversion to it simply because of ignorance. Language planners and the Federal Government should endeavour to disabuse the minds of people generally that the Nigerian Pidgin is not inferior to any language and that it is capable of performing a variety of functions like other language varieties if standardized. It is very important to let them know that it is no longer a variety of the English language.

The government should set up a committee consisting of specialists in language planning to do this job. A substantial amount of money should be set aside for it.

The government on the completion of this job should call for a referendum in order to know if members of the general public are satisfied that the language could function as the official language of the country. Should the result be positive work should start on its standardization. If, however, it is negative, ways of evolving a language indigenous to Nigeria should be developed.

It is suggested that a survey is still carried out to know how people from all walks of life feel about the adoption of the language.

The sample of the present study consisted of mainly undergraduates restricted to University of Nigeria. A more comprehensive survey is required.

References

- Adekunle M. A. (1990). Language in Multicultural Context. In *Multilingualism, Minority Language and Language Policy in Nigeria*. E. N. Emanajo (ed) Agbor: Central Books Limited, 239 -247.
- Babatunde, A. (1998). Language and the Nation: The Nigerian Situation. In *Journal of English Studies JESvu*, 150- 160.

Babatunde, Y. A. (2004b). Relationship Between Students' Perception and Their Linguistic

Backgrounds on the Adoption of Pidgin as an Official Language in Nigeria. Already Accepted for Publication in *Knowledge Review, A Multidisciplinary Journal by NAFAK*.

Elugbe, B. O. (1990). National Language and National Development. In *Multilingualism, Minority ■ Language and Language Policy in Nigeria*. E. N. Emanajo (ed) Agbor: Central Books Limited, 10-19.

Ifode, S. D. (1983). Is Nigerian Pidgin English Ceolising? *JOLAN*, 199 - 203.

Mafeni, B. (1971). Nigerian Pidgin. In *The English Language in West Africa*. John Spencer (ed) London: Longman Group Limited, 93-112.

Ofuokvuu, D. (1990). Ethno linguistic Vitality and Language Planning. *Multilingualism, Minority Language and Language Policy in Nigeria*. E. N. Emanajo (ed) Agbor: Central Books Limited, 73 - 80.

Omamar, A. P. (1990). Pidgins and Pseudo Pidgins: A Case Study of the Nigerian Situation. In *Research in African Language and Linguistics* (1) 43 - 55.

Sofunke, B. (1990). National Language Policy for Democratic Nigeria. In *Multilingualism, Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria* E. N. Emanajo (eds), Agbor: Central Books Limited, 31-49.

Todd, L. (1974). *Pidgins and Creoles*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.