



Nigerian Pidgin Captions on Lorries in Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Study

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ABSTRACT

Lorries are among the vehicles that convey goods across Nigeria. Many of such lorries have fascinating captions expressed in Nigerian Pidgin. This paper attempts a sociolinguistic overview of selected captions on lorries. In using written language, the writer is expected to convey relevant information in terms of making the message such that can be processed easily via encoder-decoder shared knowledge. Indeed, language is the medium or vehicle for conveying ideas. The use of Nigerian Pidgin on lorries is informed by its communicative potentials, being a language that conveys the users' socio-cultural nuances at individual and collective levels. Hinging on Stance and Engagement Theory, this study concludes that Nigerian Pidgin is used as captions in lorries to transmit knowledge, lampoon societal vices, and awaken the readers' consciousness on states-of-affairs.

KEYWORDS: Sociolinguistics, discourse, Nigerian Pidgin, lorries, Stance and Engagement Theory

INTRODUCTION

It is of sociolinguistic relevance that Nigeria Pidgin is deployed in the transportation domain in a populous country like Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin (NP) remains a potent means of communication in Nigeria because the socially realistic phenomena that it conveys are experienced by the people in the country; people cannot live in a society without identifying with its norms, values and beliefs. It is through language societal values are conveyed. Roger Fowler [1] opines that "language is the chief instrument of socialization, which is the process by which a person is, will-nilly, moulded into conformity with the established systems of beliefs of the society into which S/he happens to be born ...". Knowledge of the environment in which language is used is essential for successful inference-making. Although this study investigates the use and interpretation of Nigerian Pidgin from a sociolinguistic standpoint, it draws insights from related disciplines, particularly from discourse analysis and pragmatics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study that investigates Nigerian Pidgin used as captions on lorries. Chukwuma [2] investigates Nigerian Pidgin as a means of human development. Obi [3] investigates attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin. Research also abound on the use of Nigerian

Pidgin in mass media. The focus (domain) of this particular study is not only novel, but also expands the literature on Nigerian Pidgin discourse.

RELATED LITERATURE

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of language and society. It elucidates the co-existence of different languages in society. Within a social structure, there are varieties of languages which contribute to the linguistic system, and facilitate choice-making. Pertinent in this field of linguistics is efforts of the government of different regions to solve language problems and language-related problems. Sociolinguistics is about language and society. Bosede Sotiloye [4] gives an elaborate definition of sociolinguistics:

Sociolinguistics is a field of study which relates societal problems to linguistic/language problems. It answers the question "how do our social and cultural background affect our use of language? It is a branch of linguistics which tries to answer questions like who says what to whom, when, where, how and why?

One of the major aims of sociolinguistics is the study of the use of language in its social and cultural contexts. It studies the norms of the society at large and examines how the individual exploits his awareness of the society's norms in order to achieve particular effects.



Indeed, sociolinguistics is about speech community (a group of individuals who speak same language using parameters that produce mutual intelligibility). Nigeria is an example of a large speech community which accommodates language varieties. Due to the concept of socialization which is inevitable in a speech community, the individuals therein can shift from being monolinguals to becoming bilinguals or multilinguals. According to Abiodun Sofunke [5], "Sociolinguistics ... is another major area of applied linguistics. The sociolinguistic aspect of applied linguistics is concerned with issues which indicate the interaction between language and society. Society is in general divided along class and occupational lines, these divisions being in most cases reflected in language. The elucidation of the nature and use of these socially stratified speech forms is the business of sociolinguistics."

Discourse

Discourse is "language in use" (Brown and Yule [6]. From the functions which language performs in society, it is clear that language is an instrument of communication among human beings (cf. Wale Osisonwo [7]). Discourse is essentially talk/interaction, and operates as written or spoken communication. The structure/organization of discourse can be analyzed, and this process is known as discourse analysis. Crucial concepts in discourse analysis are conversation, participants, opening and closing, speaker change, selecting next speaker, discourse interruption, topic negotiation, speech errors, repair mechanism, role sharing, talk initiation, adjacency pairs, summon and eliciting in talk.

When discourse operates, language use becomes clearly a phenomenon beyond the physical property of a sentence. For example, in using Nigerian Pidgin in lorries, contextual underpinnings are invoked. Although discourse texts are of various types (genres), the analyst is mainly interested in the study of textual meanings not just in terms of the linguistic properties of texts, but also in terms of the extra-linguistic realities (socio-cultural nuances) that generate such written or spoken texts.

To understand what language is used for, there is need to first understand the nature of language. Thus, interactions (conversations), intentions and meanings are crucial in discourse analysis. Indeed, from an interdisciplinary approach the study of texts – for example, drawing insights from pragmatics and sociolinguistics, speakers' or writers' intentions, beliefs, feelings and context – textual meanings can be deduced. Discourse operates successfully because of the mutual knowledge that the participants have about discourse subjects¹. When a participant engages in discourse, he/she is in a process of negotiation with other participants, and should therefore do what it takes for his/her contribution(s) to cohere with those of the other participants. We posit therefore, that in this study, the writers

of the selected captions on the lorries explore writer-reader shared knowledge in conveying their messages.

Nigerian Pidgin

David Esizimotor and Francis Egbokhare [8] submit that "Nigeria has a population of more than 162 million people (July 2011 United Nations estimate) scattered across its 923,768 square kilometers of swamps, forests and savannahs. The country is an amalgamation of ethnically diverse groups of people speaking well over 500 different languages." David Esizimotor and Francis Egbokhare [8] also note that "The Portuguese were the first group of Europeans to visit and explore coastal Nigeria, especially around the area now known geographically as the Niger Delta. They started trading with the people of the region from as early as 1469 AD. They established strong diplomatic ties between some of the great kingdoms of the region and Portugal. They established schools and churches where they taught Portuguese and the doctrines of Christianity in the region. And this brought their language close to languages of the Niger Delta for an extended period of time. This, of course became crucial to the evolution of the *Naija*, which started out as a Portuguese-based pidgin in the Niger Delta". NP is so dominant in certain parts of Nigeria; it is creolized in some parts of the country.

Temitope Abiodun Balogun [9] submits that "a source had it that 'Pidgin' (especially in West Africa) arose from the contact between the Chinese and the European traders and such was a mispronunciation of the word "business" by the Chinese (Naro, 1973)². Pidgin is also said to resemble or closely related to a Hebrew word *Pidjom* which means 'barter' (Rickford, 1998). It is of particular interest to note that Pidgin has to do with trade or business, contact or migration between two hitherto cultural sets of people." According to David Esizimotor and Egbokhare [8] "Current estimates show that around 5 million people speak *Naija* as first language while over 75 million people use it as a second language in Nigeria and in Nigeria Diaspora communities in Europe, America and other parts of the world ..."

The vocabulary of NP is a product of the lexicon of English and Nigerian languages. However, scholars hold the view that Portuguese also contributes to the lexicon of Nigerian Pidgin³.

Obi Edith Ifeyinwa [3] cites Yule who lists linguistic features that are typical of English-based Pidgins:

- i. Absence of any complex grammatical morphology and a limited vocabulary;
- ii. Inflectional suffixes such as -s (plural) and -s (possessive) on nouns in Standard
- iii. English are rare in Pidgins, for example, 'a lot of cars' is translated as 'plenti plenty car'.

- iv. Functional morphemes often take the place of inflectional morphemes found in the source language. For example, instead of changing the form of 'you' to 'your' as in the English phrase, 'your book', English-based Pidgin uses a form like 'book bilong you'... Again Pidgin language usually uses reduplication as intensifiers or modifying adverbs. For instance, in Standard English (SE) 'The soup is very palatable' is translated in Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as 'The supu swit well well (reduplication).'

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stance and Engagement Theory

Ayo Osisanwo [10] cited in *JESAN* Vol. 19, Number 1, p. 149, presents Stance and Engagement Theory elaborately:

Stance, according to Hyland (2005:176), expresses a textual 'voice' or community recognized personally. Stance can be seen as an attributional dimension and includes features which refer to the ways speakers or writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments about a particular topic. It is the ways that writers intrude to stamp their personal authority into their arguments. According to Bibber and Finnegan (1989:124), "stance is the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements or commitments concerning propositional content of a message." Specific word choices are made to convey such judgements and opinions. Other scholars have used words such as appraisal, attitude, evaluation, among others, to represent the concept. Stance, therefore, gives the speaker an opportunity to present his views on a propositional content ... The four elements of stance as identified by Hyland include Hedges, Boosters, Attitude markers, self-mention.

Engagement, according to Hyland (2005:176), is "an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations." Hyland acknowledges that stance and engagement overlap; they are two sides of a coin and contribute to the interpersonal aspect of discourse. The four elements of engagement as identified by Hyland include Reader-pronouns, Directives, Questions, Shared knowledge, Personal asides.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data for analysis are presented below as **Datum i-viii**:

Datum i: *Monkey dey work baboo dey chop.*

Datum i is against the practice whereby some people go through the pains of working while others only enjoy the benefits (money, food, material thing, assistance, etc.). The

practice operates in different spheres of life: family, work-place, etc. The writer explores skillful analogy to convey the message – writer-reader shared knowledge of the natural relationship between a monkey and the baboo tree. The language is figurative; the caption uses "monkey" and "baboo" as metaphor for "the person that is working" and "the other person that is enjoying the benefits" respectively. Each reader applies the caption to his/her particular circumstance. In a work-place, employees who are denied salaries can apply the caption to their situation. Similarly, a commercial lorry driver who thinks that by driving the lorry from one part of the country to another, he is doing more work than the owner of the lorry, can interpret **Datum i** accordingly. It is clear that those who write NP captions on lorries are very familiar with states-of-affairs in society.

Datum ii: *Man must wak.*

In the above text, "man" is generic, as it means "human beings". The propositional content of the text is that "people have to work hard because there should not be food for a lazy man". The caption does not only apply to the readers, but also to the driver of the lorry himself, who travels from one place to another in search for his daily bread. Nigerian Pidgin captions on lorries have indirect illocutionary potentials. Therefore, **Datum ii** can be used to defend illegal operations or criminal acts. The textual voice in Nigerian Pidgin captions is often relative, depending heavily on readers' perception of the world and its attendant phenomena. The captions give attributes to human practices and also spur the readers to give representations to such practices – attributional inference strategy which involves picking referents from the universe of discourse. Although **Datum ii** conveys the writer's judgement or opinion, the readers' supremacy in the decoding process is acceptable. The universality of **Datum ii** is amplified by its relevance in all kinds of jobs that people do to earn a living in any part of the world. The readers who understand the meaning of the caption paraphrases it as "Man must be able to put food on the table." Indeed, In Nigeria, NP captions on lorries are motivational, didactic and inspirational.

Datum iii: *Let dem say. Na dem sabi.*

We live in a world where gossip abounds: at work-places, streets, markets, places of worship, schools, etc. The writer of **Datum iii** expresses his/her disgust on the practice, but covertly acknowledges the fact that our fellow human beings must make comments about us. **Datum iii** is concerned about the bad comments people make to ruin others. Since the readers are also victims of the practice, they decode the caption easily. The second clause in the text reveals that the encoder appraises/evaluates the trend and does not think agitation is necessary when a person is a victim of slander, gossip or hate speech. Nigerian Pidgin captions on lorries often have their different paraphrases that readers invoke when they read such captions. For example, *God dey* comes to

mind when **Datum iii** is read. By saying *God dey*, the encoder passes his/her judgement on slanderers, critics, gossippers. The propositional content is that only God knows the truth concerning issues. That being the case, people should not worry over the untrue, negative comments that others make concerning them. If the expression *God dey*, is used as a caption on a lorry, “God” functions as writer’s attitude-marker; the referent “God” operates as a conventional implicature as it depicts/implies honesty, truth, righteousness, justice, uprightness, transparency. In using NP as captions in lorries, writers sometimes avoid self-mention for the purpose of impressing certain message in the readers mind. Another Nigerian Pidgin expression that comes to mind when **Datum iii** is read, is *You nko?* People often use it as a reply to those who accuse or abuse them; its propositional content is that “even the abusers themselves are not better than those they abuse”.

Datum iv: *Wahala no dey finish.*

The propositional content of **Datum iv** is that “human beings live in a world where problems/challenges are inevitable”. This caption therefore functions as a preparatory speech act. The reader is encouraged, motivated, inspired, equipped, spirited. NP captions are meant for mixed audience who accept the captions that encourage them and reject those that lampoon them. The expression *wahala* in this datum shows that indeed, some NP captions are formed from Nigerian languages; *wahala* is from Hausa. David Esizimotor and Francis Egbokhare [8] list other examples of NP expressions that emanate from Hausa:

- dabaru ‘to destroy’
- dogo ‘a tall person’
- gwora ‘cola nut’
- koboko ‘horse whip’
- suya ‘spicy grilled meat’

Datum v: *Dis one na carry go.*

The above text reveals that the English language is often “nativized” in non-native settings, and some of the “nativized” expressions abound in NP. In Nigeria, “carry-go” is used as an Ascriptive (speech act); see Bach and Harnish’s [11] speech act taxonomy for more insights on speech act categories. An Ascriptive describes or qualifies a person or thing. As an Ascriptive, the expression “carry go” means the person, animal, place or thing being qualified, is very good, reliable, standard, suitable, rugged, etc. In different contexts of use, “carry go” conveys similar semantic primes, depending on what is being qualified. Interestingly, native speakers of English from whose language the expression is formed, do not know the meaning. If the lorry that bears the caption is used for carrying certain products for sale, then the caption advertizes the product for enhanced patronage. By implication, Nigerian Pidgin captions contributes to

commerce, economy and nation-building. Since **Datum v** is read by mixed audience, it can be used in multifaceted domains for effective communication of illocutionary goals.

Datum vi: *He go beta.*

In Nigerian Pidgin, the pronoun “he” is often used in the syntactic position of “it” when the former obtains as subject of the sentence. But where it obtains as object of a sentence, “am” replaces “it” as in:

- a. It will be good.
- b. He go beta.
- c. I know it.
- d. I know am.

Datum vi captures the painful truth about human existence; life is bedeviled by hardship, struggle, calamities. Indeed, good times are often elusive. Stance and Engagement Theory submits that writers of certain texts explore a potent communicative strategy: “alignment with readers”. Like the readers of **Datum vi**, the writer undergoes the challenges of life that his/her readers undergo. An NP caption such as *Na wa fo we Niger* amplifies **Datum vi**. The use of reader-pronouns facilitates textual cohesion and thematization when Nigerian Pidgin is deployed as captions in lorries. The pronoun “we” in the text accentuates writer-reader shared knowledge besides making the readers appear as intra-textual audience.

Datum vii: *Na wetin you carry?*

The above text is an indirect illocutionary strategy; instead of being a question, it is a Requestive (speech act category in Bach and Harnish’s taxonomy). Policemen who mount road-blocks are known for using the caption to request money from motorists. The encoder uses it to condemn the practice. Many of these policemen are not interested in searching the vehicles so as to arrest those conveying contraband goods. All they are after is getting petty sums of money from the motorists. The situation enables criminals to escape being caught. Based on shared knowledge about how policemen behave at check points, the writer of **Datum vii** expects the readers to recall their own experiences with such policemen (contextual recall). A proposition is given communicative value if the encoder makes it understandable to the decoder. An utterance is optimally relevant if its relevance is adequate for the processing effort of the addressee. Scholars have noticed that texts have external relations. If there is no linguistic unit that reveals the topic of discourse, then the topic must be inferred from extra-linguistic elements of the situational context such as the real world practice of corruption across facets of human endeavor. Without the larger context, a sentence can be understood as an explanation of, or comment on any discourse topic imaginable.

Language use is essentially the performance of actions (cf. Austin [13]), and this is why various contextual nuances

inform language use: social and physical circumstances, identities, attitudes, abilities and beliefs of participants and relations holding or supposed to be holding between participants. The goal of pragmatics is to systematically account for the dynamics of human communication in relation to meaning. David A. Brenders [12] posits that “One of the central issues involved in any systematic analysis of communication is ... to regard meaning as the products of social action.

Datum viii: *Na wetin concern agbero with overload?*

In **Datum viii**, the expression *agbero* is formed from Yoruba, one of the major tribes in Nigeria. Other NP expressions taken from Yoruba as noted by David Esizimotor and Francis Egbokhare [8] include:

- adire ‘tie and die’
- agbo ‘herbal medicine’
- ashawo ‘a prostitute’
- shakara ‘show-off’
- she ‘hope’
- shele ‘happen/take place’

Those referred to as *agbero* are garage boys who scout for passengers. The propositional content of the caption is that “so long as their vehicles can occupy passengers who pay the transportation cost, it does not matter that the vehicles are congested”. By extension, the caption implies that so long as a practice provides benefits, how it is done does not matter. Readers interpret the caption by personalizing it to their particular circumstances as in:

- a. When a student engages in malpractice to pass an examination;
- b. When a politician offers bribe to win an election;
- c. When a man gets involved in money-making rituals.

In Nigeria, to understand NP captions on lorries, cognition process is crucial because the underpinnings (intentional speech acts) of the captions have to be worked out by the readers. Cognitive pragmatics investigates the mental states (beliefs, thoughts and intentions of speakers/hearers or writers/readers. John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. [14] posits that “a linguistic act, or speech act, is an intentional, meaningful act performed with an expression or expressions.”

DISCUSSION

The context of an utterance is often very crucial in making the appropriate inference. Inferences are made on the basis of the background context, our experience of life or world knowledge, and the shared beliefs. Knowledge of the literal meaning of an utterance often contributes to appropriate inference that will facilitate the decoding of its non-literal

meaning. Austin [13] submits that “saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons; and it may be done with the design, intention or purpose of producing them ... The NP captions analyzed in this study reveal that speaker-meaning is successfully conveyed when substantial shared knowledge operates between the writers and their audience⁴. It is the task of the decoder of an utterance to work out its meaning in context. Stranson (cited in Leech [15]) posits that “understanding is decoding or calculating all that might reasonably have been meant by the speaker of the utterances.” Similarly, Levinson [16] rightly notes that “understanding an utterance involves the making of inferences that are assumed or what has been said before.”

Nigeria Pidgin captions on lorries are indeed, decoded by deploying presuppositions that are germane to the environmental and socio-cultural underpinnings of the constructs. Wodak [17] submits that “the concept of presupposition is central to linguistics. The analysis of presuppositions within speech act theory, which began with John Austin (1961), makes it possible to make explicit the implicit assumptions and intertextual relations that underlie text-production”. The fact that speech acts are often intentionally performed, makes them crucial in communication; their intentional characteristics is also a basis for their classification. Jacob Mey [18] opines that “as to the question of intentions, any discussion of intentionality should be aware of the relationships that exist among the individuals to whom the intentions are ascribed, and of the ways they perceive the others as intentional beings, in a greater, societal context. It is not primarily what I say, or intends to say, that determines my speech act, but the way it fits into the entire pattern of acting as a social being that is typical for my culture. Even though speech is a constitutive component of human individual and social life (as is language in general), it is still part of a larger context, of an even more encompassing activity. In the final analysis, we will have to ask ourselves how speech acts relate to our human activity as a whole: thinking ‘globally’ while acting ‘locally’, as the saying goes. It is for this ecological view of human acting, to which the societal and global environment provides the adequate (necessary and sufficient backdrop that I have devised the term ‘pragmatic act’ ...).”

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is a potent language for communicating societal issues via a wide range of representations. Language is very crucial to human existence. Charles Chukwuma Montanya [2] notes that “one of the most important differences between man and animals is man’s ability to speak and make others understand him. Language is the only means through which this is achieved in man’s life. Language is the medium or vehicle for conveying ideas, a system of arbitrary vocal symbol based on social cooperation; the totality of meaningful utterances in a given society ...”

CONCLUSION

It takes context-driven inference-making to decode NP deployed in lorries used in Nigeria. Adegbija [19] posits that “inference involves the drawing of a conclusion from known or assumed facts or statements, from available data or a particular premise. It is the deductive process through which the addressee or reader progresses from the literal meaning of an utterance to what the speaker/writer actually intends to express.” In Nigeria, NP captions on lorries usually have referential settings/domains: family, government, work-place, market, etc. These settings are essentially worlds-spoken-of (a term used by Allan [20]), and impinge on the structure of the Nigerian Pidgin expressions articulated. However, the readers are not alienated from the message because they are part of the existential phenomena conveyed. Through direct or indirect communicative strategies, various messages are conveyed via Nigerian Pidgin as captions on lorries used in Nigeria. The messages are instructive, satirical and thought-provoking, despite being seemingly comic⁵. This shows that although NP is not an officially esteemed language in Nigeria, its role in nation-building cannot be denied.

Notes

¹ These subjects are dynamic and do not revolve around a single participant.

² Another account has it that it came from the Portuguese word “OCUPACIAO”, which means “occupation”.

³ In this regard, David Esizimotor and Francis Egbokhare [8] submit:

From English:

- chop ‘to eat/to consume’
- domot ‘door mouth area’
- doti ‘dirt’
- pesin ‘someone’
- trowe ‘throw away’
- tok ‘to speak’
- waka ‘to walk’

From Edo:

- kpangolo ‘container’
- kpekere ‘plantain chips’
- okada ‘motor-bike’
- ororo ‘vegetable oil’
- ozeba ‘a big problem’

From Igbo:

- akamu ‘corn starch/pap’
- biko ‘please’

- obodo ‘land/country’
- okrika ‘second-handed items’
- ogbanje ‘a water spirit’
- ugu ‘pumpkin leaves’

From Portuguese:

- kpalava ‘trouble’
- pikin ‘child’
- sabi ‘to know’

4. This view aligns with Bruno G. Bara [21] who notes that “Communication is essentially a cooperative activity between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed by all those actors together engaged in the shared task of reciprocally attending to the other communicants’ words.”

⁵ Indeed, NP captions on lorries have discrete topics of discourse that necessitate being processed by the readers for optimal relevance. See and Sperber and Wilso [22,] Xinyue Yau [23] and Acheoah et al. [24] for tips on processing utterances for topic relevance.

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