

Perspectives and Problems of Codifying Nigerian Pidgin English Orthography

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Abstract

The essence of the paper is to look for an orthography which would form the basis for a future development of a standard for Nigerian Pidgin English. The paper begins the search by examining the views of scholars like Mafeni (1971), Elugbe and Omamor (1991) among others. The paper considers the various views and agrees with the school that says Nigerian Pidgin English should be seen as a language in its own right and should be left to develop along its own lines. Against this background, the paper in its conclusion aligns with the view that Nigerian Pidgin English orthography should be indigenized and seen as an evolving Nigerian language.

Introduction

It is generally agreed that pidgins arise from contact situations. They evolve when there is a dire and urgent need to communicate for a purpose like trade among persons who do not subscribe to a common language. The groups in this linguistic dilemma make desperate attempts to communicate in one of the languages, leading to what Elugbe and Omamor (1991:2) refer to as a rudimentary contact speech form.

This rudimentary contact speech form is limited in vocabulary and relies heavily on gesticulation. Pidgins have thus been variously described as, 'contact', 'trade', 'auxiliary', 'debased', 'jargonized', 'rudimentary', 'minimum' and 'makeshift' linguistic forms among other nomenclatures.

Elugbe and Omamor (op cit) opine that this can only be true of the initial stages of the development of pidgins. Agheyisi (1971) sees West African Pidgin as simplified English with a lot of lexical gaps filled by English. West African Pidgin is described as impoverished.

The origin of Nigeria Pidgin English (henceforth NPE) is traceable to the contact between the coastal peoples of Nigeria and the Europeans.

Egbokhare (2006:6) observes that the first contact was made by the Portuguese around 1469. The Dutch followed about 1593, but soon faded away to be replaced by the English from 1650 onwards.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991:3) claim that some form of Portuguese pidgin must have been spoken along the coast. This must have been short-lived with the ousting of the Portuguese by the French, the Dutch and the English. Among these groups, the British impact was more enduring and resulted in the development of an English-based pidgin along the Nigerian coast.

The same reasons that led to the evolution of NPE has popularized it in Nigeria. Urbanization, trade and other contact situations within the country have led to the spread of NPE. The language has become a lingua franca not only in a multiethnic Niger Delta, but in the whole of Nigeria. The multiethnicity of barracks and urban centres has also helped in transporting the language inland. The result is that we now have varieties of pidgin based roughly on the ethnic groups and geographical locations. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) observe that it has creolized in the Warri and Sapele areas of the Niger Delta.

Mafeni (1971:97) says that NP comprises a base language-English, which has been and continues to be modified by indigenous languages.

The present profile of NP is that of a lingua franca, building linguistic and communicative bridges among the 400 or so ethnic groups in Nigeria.

NPE can be regarded as 'a child of necessity' and a language of convenience. This is because of its use as a contact language and its communicative value among our many ethnic groups. Starting from the coastal regions, it has metamorphosed into a lingua franca, penetrating inland to the nooks and crannies of Nigeria.

In spite of its rising status as a language to communicate second experience in Nigeria, it has been kept far away, like a leper from the school system; seemingly condemned to an informal status. There is the fear that

introducing NPE in schools will contaminate the English language. So great is the phobia for NPE in schools that fines are imposed on students and pupils in our schools for daring to speak Pidgin English during school hours.

The consequence of this is that written pidgin is found mainly in scripts in the electronic media in the form of propaganda, advertisement and poems which as far as I know, have never been recommended in the primary and secondary schools.

In spite of these setbacks scholars like Elugbe (1995:291) suggest the use of NPE in areas where the multiplicity of languages would make it difficult to implement the national policy on language. Gani-Ikilama (1990) in a paper titled 'Use of Nigerian Pidgin in Education? Why Not?' also speaks in the same vein.

Against this background, the pertinent question to ask is, 'How do we develop a standard orthography for NPE given the fact that it is an every-man to himself language?'

The Issue of Orthography

The 8th edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English by A.S. Hornby defines orthography as 'the system of spelling in a language'.

Wales (1989:330) says that 'orthography' is from Greek meaning 'correct spelling'. It therefore refers to the (standard) spelling system of a language. The English spelling system is referred to as decidedly traditional because it refers to pronunciations current in the 16th century.

Chalker and Weiner (1994:276) see orthography as 'The study or science of how words are spelt contrasted with graphology. Referring to Earle (1873) they say further that when we use the word 'orthography', we do not mean a mode of spelling which is true to the pronunciation, but one which is conventionally correct.

To Akmajian et al (2001:584), orthography is any writing system that is widely used by the members of a given society to write their language. They explain further that most orthographies do not represent the speech sounds of the language in a systematic way.

Yule (1996:9) traces the development of writing from pictograms, ideograms, logograms, and rebus to the modern form of alphabetic writing. He also notes that there is not always a correspondence between symbol and sound. The mismatch of sound and symbol in English according to him is largely a result of printing tradition and the influence of various languages on English.

A common thread that runs through these definitions and explanations is non-compulsory nature of correspondence between sound and the symbol used to represent it. It therefore follows that the symbols of a language evolve out of arbitrariness and tradition, rather than some logical match between sound and symbol.

Mafeni 1971

Mafeni (1971) is of the opinion that given the phonology of a few varieties of NPE that he has studied, an orthography similar to that of Yoruba or Igbo would not only show clearly at least the phonetic/phonological differences between the base language and pidgin but would emphasise the independent nature of NPE.

To defend his position, he illustrates with two passages which according to him, are clearly Nigerian pidgin but have been written in English orthography.

Ah! I hear say' e get one letter so from im boy dat "kobo-kobo" boy dem call Mr. Chukwuka. Me I no know wetin 'e begin do as if' e mad. Dem don carry am go Abeokuta Mental Hospital. Some people wey know-am proper for Ilesha say na de same ting wey kill 'im papa. Dem say 'e run mad one afternoon, kill one of 'im own pikin with machet and run inside bush...(V.C. Ike, Toads for Supper, London, 1965)

so e make two time way Mr. Midman come thisi Niger Company to come and be. AG... and that time I de for work, and them write come from England say Mr. Midman don resign from Niger Company and then he dash government ten hundred say because he be big man and that be the time I de thatsal'.

(from a recording by Kay Williamson in Western Ijo Division in 1963. The speech is that of Chief Moke Ohihia). Comment by Mafeni (1971)

The passages give the impression of a sub-standard dialect of English. Mafeni observes that the spoken form is a different matter. Having listened to the original recording of Chief Ohihia's speech, he regrets the false impression that the transcription has created even though Mafeni himself admits that the transcriber, had little knowledge of what he was doing.

He goes further to say that the extract from Ike's novel also illustrates the disadvantage of trying to write Nigerian Pidgin according to English orthographic conventions. In the sentence, 'I no like de way you de waste your time come here', the two words 'de' in 'de way' and in 'you de waste' are spelt alike, but they are actually two different lexical and grammatical items with different phonetic realization. The first is phonetically /di/ and the second is /de/.

Mafeni's position that NPE should adopt an indigenous orthography is illustrated in the NPE vowels he identifies together with their corresponding orthography.

| Vowel Phonemes | Phonemic | Orthographic | English | Equivalent |
|----------------|----------|--------------|---------|------------|
| i | /bit/ | bit | bit | beat |
| e | /pén/ | pén | pén | pain |
| ε | /bet / | bét | bét | bet |
| a | /hát/ | hát | hát | heart |
| ɔ | /h t/ | hót | hót | hot |
| o | /tót/ | tot | tot | carry |
| u | /fút/ | fút | fút | foot |

Elugbe and Omamor (1991)

They look at three broad options open to writing NPE.

English Spelling/Alphabet

The first is to reproduce the pidgin words exactly as they are in English. The English spelling is fully retained. Very few items are written in pidgin spelling. This approach is favoured by Nigerian creative writers like Achebe and Soyinka. Lines from Aig-Imoukhuede's poem, "one Wife for One Man' are used to illustrate this orthographic style.

1. My fader before my fader get him wife borku
2. E no' get equality palaver; he live well.

Comments by Elugbe and Omamor (1991)

They observe that the reader of such pidgin writing must first be literate in English, which removes from pidgin as a language in its own right. Words not of English origin would have to be written using principles that are radically different from those involved in English spelling. This in their view, would make the orthography of NPE even more erratic than English. Although this option will probably be attractive to printers, publishers and the educated, it would give the impression of NPE English as a deviant form of English. They agree with Mafeni (1971:102) that this option would amount to a gross distortion of the true signal.

The lines from Aig-Imoukhuede are used to illustrate the problems and inconsistencies of this approach to writing NPE.

My fader before my fader get him wife borku.

Apart from 'borku' which is not of English origin, all other words are of English origin and spelt the English way. It is argued further that it cannot be used consistently by different writers and the same writer is often inconsistent in his spelling as illustrated in the second line.

E no get equality palaver; he live well.
 Here, both 'E' and 'he' refer to 'my fadar before my fader'

but they are spelt differently, even though they have the same sound.

Phonetic Alphabet

The second option according to Elugbe and Omamor (1991:114) is the phonetic alphabet. It indicates every systematic phonetic feature, freely using special symbols and diacritics. They quote Oyebade (1983) as using this method with symbols from IPA.

Comment by Elugbe and Omamor (1991)

It is said to have the advantage of being possible to read by every trained linguist. It is a faithful phonetic record of spoken pidgin. The problem with it is that it is not intended for the public and is restricted to academic works to be read by specialists. They do not therefore, treat it in any detail.

New Modern Orthography

The third option, according to Omamor (1991:115) is to attempt a new modern orthography based on the principles of a good orthography and on the acceptance that NPE is a language in its own right, independent of English.

They discuss a number of possibilities. One such possibility is in Horsfall (1981). She has no special symbols for consonants. She uses digraphs such as 'sh' for /ʃ/, 'ch' for /tʃ/, and the symbol 'j' for /dʒ/.

Todd (1974) and Jones (1971) employ special symbols only for the vowels /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ as in krio or for /ɔ/ only as in Cameroon Pidgin.

Elugbe and Omamor observes that consonants do not pose problems in the writing of most English based pidgins and creoles. They observe further that problem is with representing /ɛ/ and /ɔ/.

They suggest, however, that when the contrasting sounds in a given language are more than we can take care of within the Roman alphabet, there are three basic ways of getting round the problems.

The first is to take two letters of the alphabet to represent a sound for which there is no direct equivalent in the Roman alphabet

Comment by Elugbe and Omamor (1991)

They are not critical of this approach but rather, they express their preference for it when they say that it is necessary that an orthography for NPE should be a modern orthography based on the principle that NPE is a Nigerian language in need of a writing system based on a clear understanding of its phonology.

Egbokhare (2003)

He begins by agreeing with Elugbe (1995) that anglicized spelling is predominant. Quoting the same source he says, "the common practice is still what they call 'anglicised' spelling which is characterized by the writing of most Nigerian Pidgin words exactly as in English while allowing a few tell-tale examples'.

Egbokhare goes further to comment on Elugbe and Omamor (1991) that they propose a writing system for NPE which follows the established traditions of writing Nigerian languages and consequently avoids the pitfalls of inconsistencies associated with the English orthography. Such a system would make NPE look less English and independent.

Egbokhare (2003) however feels that the issues of how to write NPE is not as straight forward as many think. He justifies an anglicised spelling on the following grounds.

First, existing writing tradition in NPE is based on it. Second, an over whelming percentage of NPE forms are sourced in English. Consequently, adopting an anglicized spelling appears to be an objective recognition of that fact. Besides, it will make for easy reading of NPE, since those already familiar with English would find the words familiar. This according to Egbokhare could make NPE and English mutually reinforcing as media of education since native speakers of NPE would gain some advantages as English language learners because of their familiarity with the English spelling. Egbokhare posits that NPE can benefit positively from the fortunes of English as an international language and the language of technology through its access to the English vocabulary. Based on this, 'pragmatic considerations of accessibility', Egbokhare supports an anglicized spelling.

Egbokhare (2003) further argues that it serves no useful purpose trying to deny the English connection of NPE as Elugbe's support for writing NPE in the traditions of Nigerian languages seems to suggest. The relationship NPE has with English cannot be a liability if properly managed. To Egbokhare, if this relationship is so seen, then, it is because of other factors not primarily located in the linguistic realities themselves.

In spite of these arguments Egbokhare (2003) sees 'compelling reasons for adopting a Nigeriansed spelling'.

There is the issue of what to do with words that are borrowed from Nigerian languages. NPE is rhythmically incompatible with English. Its rhythm and intonation are typically tone based. An anglicized spelling with tone super-imposed is both irritating, confusing and impractical. Egbokhare (2003) goes further to say that if we take this together with the fact that a wrong impression of phono-semantic equivalence between NPE and English is suggested by such a spelling, we face an urgent need to adopt the Nigerianised spelling. Not much of English sound quality and meaning is actually left in the so-called English words in NPE. He also mentions that the NPE vocabulary does not correspond with the English vocabulary as some often erroneously believe. There is also a case of NPE vocabulary of English origin. His observation is that often educated speakers of NPE, draft English words into NPE when they are confronted with situations for which appropriate words do not exist – a case of code-mixing. Having English looking words in NPE could create a problem if readers erroneously give English readings to them. This will discourage a proper leaning of NPE in terms of sound qualities and grammar.

Based on these arguments, Egbokhare confirms Elugbe's position that anglicized spelling gives the impression of NPE as some form of devalued English. This may evoke too serious a negative attitude towards NPE. Egbokhare concludes thus, 'from the foregoing, it appears logical to adopt a spelling system that confers some independence on NPE.

Concluding further, Egbokhare suggests 'a more pragmatic approach' which essentially recognizes the origin, nature and evolution of NPE. He therefore suggests a 'pidginization' of English orthography as an approach to the problem; a situation where NPE will retain its character as a pidgin even in the way it is written. Essentially, such an orthography will be substantially English but with some characteristics of a Nigeriansed spelling. This can be achieved by:

- (a) Retaining Nigerian language words as they are normally written and spelt;
- (b) Retaining English words as they are written and spelt;
- (c) Minimizing superfluity and inconsistencies in the orthography: which may mean some adjustment in the English spelling.

Deuber (2005)

Deuber (2005) looks at two basic approaches to the graphization of pidgins and creoles: the etymological and phonemic. In the etymological, the spelling system of the lexifier is adopted, with some adaptations where necessary. In the phonemic approach, the pidgin is treated as a language in its own right independent of the lexifier. This results in a 'tailor-made orthography in which each phoneme is represented by exactly one symbol. Referring to Hall (1966:41), she says there is a modified version of the phonemic, which is called ethnophonemic. It is basically phonemic but diagraphs and other orthographic devices are taken over from the spelling of the lexifier to represent phonemes for which no single letter is available, in order to avoid special characters.

Comment by Deuber (2005)

People who are already literate in English favour the etymological approach; but the phonemic is likely to have a positive impact on attitudes towards the pidgin as it emphasises its distance from English. The phonemic approach would need to be taught in schools to be generally accepted. The reality or desirability of this would depend on the sociolinguistic status of the Pidgin or Creole.

Quoting Mafeni (1971:10); Ofuani (1981:340); Agheyis; (1988:239); Elugbe and Omamor (1991:Chapter 5), she argues that linguists have for a long time argued against the etymological type of spelling and for a phonologically based system. She says further that the proposals in this direction are mainly of the ethnophonemic type, with digraphs such as 'sh' and 'ch' for /ʃ/ and /tʃ/, respectively.

She gives an example with an orthography by Faraclas which she describes as ‘certainly convincing’ not only in terms of the systematic representation of NigP’s sounds which it makes possible but also in terms of simplicity, as there are no special characters and only two diacritics, the subscript diacritics marking the mid-open vowel phonemes (a device common in orthographies for Nigerian languages).

| Phoneme | Grapheme | Phoneme | Grapheme |
|---------|----------|---------|----------|
| a | a | m | M |
| b | b | n | N |
| tʃ | ch | ŋ | Ng |
| d | d | o | o |
| e | e | ɔ | ɔ |
| ɛ | ɛ | p | p |
| f | f | r | r |
| g | g | s | s |
| gb | gb | ʃ | sh |
| h | h | t | T |
| i | i | u | U |
| dʒ | j | v | V |
| K | k | w | W |
| Kp | kp | ɟ | y |
| l | l | z | z |

Source: Deuber (2005:194) as adapted from Faraclas (1996:257)

Findings

In the course of the study, the researcher found out the following:

1. The intellectual class and our creative writers generally prefer the anglicized spelling of NPE.
2. Linguists generally prefer the phonetic and ethnophonetic approaches to writing NPE.
3. The pronunciation of NPE words does not necessarily follow the phonological pattern of English. A word like ‘borrow’ /b_Drɔ̄u/ is pronounced /boro/. The pure vowel and diphthong are not pronounced as in English. English lexical items assimilated by NPE are thus closer to indigenous Nigerian languages in pronunciation.

This is acknowledged by Egbokhare (2003).

A strong reason in support of a Nigerianised spelling is the rhythmical incompatibility of NPE with English. Its rhythm and intonation are typically tone based. An anglicized spelling with tone superimposed is both irritating, confusing and impractical. If we take this together with the fact that a wrong impression of phono-semantic equivalence between NP and English is suggested by such a spelling, we face an urgent need to adopt the Nigerianized spelling.

4. NPE vowels are not as many as and do not have the nuances of pronunciation as we have in English. The realization of the vowels are closer to our indigenous languages than English. Mafeni (1971) identifies vowels which roughly correspond with the generally used seven pure vowels in our mother tongues for NPE:/i,e,ɛ,a,ɔ, o,u/.
5. Core pidgin is generally spoken by those with little or no Western Education. It is in the birthplace of NPE (the coastal towns of the Niger Delta) that the educated generally speak NPE well. The educated, especially from the majority tribes, speak what one might refer to as ‘anglicised pidgin’.

Problems of Codification

The following are the problems of codification identified in the course of the study.

1. There is a general negative attitude towards NPE. It is stigmatized and seen as the language of the lower class. Elugbe and Omamor (1991:Chapter 7) look at the attitude of various segments of the Nigerian Society to NPE: the layman, the educated, the government and the linguist. The result is a generally negative attitude.

- To the layman it is just a language of convenient communication with the educated and other groups of Nigerians with whom he does not share a common language; educated Nigerians see it as a language that confers no social status and should be kept at a distance; to the government, it is of no consequence; while among linguists, there is no agreement as to the true nature of the language.
2. There is the problem of which orthography to adopt. Is it the etymological or the phonemic? Linguists are not agreed on this, even though a majority of them go for the phonemic and its variants.
 3. NPE is still largely an oral language. The need to write it is still not considered strong enough. When there is no encouraging or compelling need for literacy, oracy persists.
 4. The elite and linguists do not seem honest in their support for writing NPE. They declare support, publicly and shield their children from it at home. The fear is usually that it will be a negative influence on English.
 5. Linguists and other groups first have to convince government on the need to write NPE. Even if this succeeds, there will be the problem of how it can be accommodated in the language policy and the usual problem of funding the implementation.

CONCLUSION

If NPE is seen as a language in its own right, it deserves to grow along its own peculiar linguistic lines and not being tied to the linguistic apron strings of a mother language.

The history of English itself reinforces the need for NPE to be left to grow its own orthography. English did not become a prestige language in one day. What we call English today is a fusion of the dialects of Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, following the Germanic invasion in about the year 449 (Baugh and Cable, 1978:46; Barber, 1993:100). The following from Baugh and Cable (1978:42) shows that we are often carried away by English.

We are so accustomed to think of English as an inseparable adjunct to the English people that we are likely to forget that it has been the language of England for a comparatively short period in the world's history. Since its introduction into the island about the middle of the fifth century it has had a career extending through only fifteen hundred years. Yet this part of the world had been inhabited by man for thousand of years, 50,000 according to more moderate estimates, 250,000 in the opinion of some.

English became less influential and inferior after the Norman conquest of 1066, when French became dominant. Its influence was re-established following the loss of Normandy in 1204 (Baugh and Cable, 1978:126). Since then English has come under various influences from other languages like Latin, Greek, German, French and African languages. This simply shows that the fortunes of a language are not predictable.

The present orthography of English is a far cry from old English. There were significant influences along the line by the invention of printing and the dictionary. This seems to suggest that the orthography of NPE is in our own hands.

The present role of NPE is that of a lingua franca and its possible future role as a more functional language, makes it deserve a standard orthography in a heterogeneous entity like Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having discussed the findings and problems associated with codifying NPE orthography, it is worthwhile to make recommendations for the future.

1. An authoritative dictionary (by linguists) of NPE should be produced. Printing and the dictionary were great stabilizing factors between the 15th and 18th centuries when the orthography of English was in disarray. NPE can borrow from this.
2. NPE should continue to be recognized as a language in its own right so that it can evolve unhindered. Giving NPE its own identity does not detract from its English connection as English itself has its connection with other languages. This would help the orthography.

3. NPE should be nativized just as we nativized English. This would prepare it for a possible enlarged function in the future. This would favour a combination of the phonetic and ethnophonetic approaches.
4. Following from the nativization, an indigenous orthography which recognizes the peculiar phonology of NPE is hereby recommended.
5. For now, it is not too clear whether NPE English can fight its way to the classroom. To prepare its for a classroom role, a positive attitude has to be developed toward it: stigmatization has to stop; funding has to be considered; a printing tradition has to be adopted and NPE given some space to co-exist with English.

As earlier suggested, the destiny of NPE orthography is in our own hands. The newly formed Pidgin English Association of Nigeria is working hard towards a standard.

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