

Of Finiteness in Nigerian Pidgin (English)

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Abstract

Nigerian Pidgin English, as a potpourri of lexicon formed from items taken from English and Nigerian languages, operates a grammatical system whose formal features parametrically varied from the grammar of its lexifier and substrates. Its grammar is simplified to pave way for easy communication between people who did not share the same tribe and tongue. This paper examines finiteness in Nigerian Pidgin English. The study reveals that the language verbs and nominal lack personal endings overtly exhibited in English to indicate finitude. Tense, aspects, number, gender and other aspects of finiteness are not morphologically marked but grammaticalized. It was concluded that, though the bulk of words that make up the Nigerian pidgin are taken from English and Nigerian indigenous languages, its grammar is unique and devoid of influence from any of its source of lexis.

Keywords: Finiteness, grammaticalization, Pidgin, Creole, inflection

Introduction

*Botafilai won bi laik bed
Bot E no fit flai laik bed
Butterfly wants to be like a bird
But it cannot fly like a bird.*

Nigerian Pidgin English initially was a circumstantial linguistic invention devised to ease the communication gap between European traders and their local Nigerian counterparts. It was a makeshift language evolving from the quest to negotiate a break in communication barrier occasioned by lack of mutual intelligibility among the strange and the diverse tongues. Afolayan (2015, p. 7) citing Decamp (1987) describes Pidgin as “an incidental communicative language within a multilingual setting which is the native language of nobody. Its vocabulary is donated by the socio-politically dominant language in the original contact situation, most especially, with the European imperialists.” This description is in line with earlier submission of Todd (1974, p. 1) who defines Pidgin as “a marginal language which arises to fulfil certain restricted communicative needs among people who have no common language”.

Pidgin can be described as a ‘macaronic’, blend or potpourri of different linguistic repertoires. It is a fusion of elements from different languages developed to observe communication aspiration of peoples who do not share the same ethnicity and language. It is therefore not ethnically marked. Pidgins have been variously called

by scholars as contact, trade, auxiliary, make-shift or marginal languages. It is a language used in trading or in any situation requiring communication between persons who do not speak each other's native language (Afolayan, 2015).

Ogundimu (2015) and Elegba (2016) group and locate Nigerian Pidgin English in West African Pidgin English (WAPE). WAPE comprises all varieties of pidgins and Creoles spoken in the coastal countries of West Africa where English is used as a second language. These are Nigerian Pidgin English and Creole, the Gambia Pidgin, Liberian Pidgin, Ghanaian Pidgin, Cameroonian Pidgin and the Sierra Leonean Krio. Ogundimu (2015, p. 21963) submits that WAPE shares a lot of structural similarities with other Pidgins and creoles spoken in African Diaspora communities through Atlantic Basin like the Jamaican Patwah; Since the countries in West Africa had similar colonial experience, the general consensus by scholars on WAPE is that the lingo emerged from trading contacts between Europeans and indigenous peoples along the coast and later spread into the interior of the coastal countries (Ofulue, 2012; Mensah, 2012).

Nigerian Pidgin English (hence NPE) is an English lexifier Pidgin. That is, English is its superstrate while other languages like French, Portuguese, and indigenous languages are the substrate source of lexical influence. NPE, according to Mensah (2012), has a number of varieties which include Wafi, spoken predominantly in Warri and Sapele; Ajegunle, spoken in Lagos and states in South West; and Una, the Calabar variety, spoken in Southern Cross River State and the varieties spoken in Port-Harcourt and Onitsha, etc. Each of these varieties has its features. However, they are mutually intelligible. Another important characteristic of all the varieties of NPE is that they developed in highly linguistically heterogeneous settings. They all exist in a diglossic relationship within the urban sociolinguistic ecology in Nigeria (Mensah, 2012).

Adeleke (2000), citing Romaine (1994), identifies two varieties of NPE based on educational level – acrolectal and basiclectal varieties. The acrolectal variety is a variety that is close to its superstrate (English) in terms of phonology but not syntax. It is easy to find the variety among students of higher institutions of learning and radio and television presenters of NPE. The basiclectal variety is far removed from its superstrate phonologically and is predominantly used by uneducated people.

As a potpourri of lexicon formed from items taken from English and Nigerian languages, NPE operates grammatical system whose formal features parametrically varied from its superstrate. The grammar of NPE is simplified to give room for easy communicative transaction among the people who do not share a common language. The simplification of the grammar manifests greatly in tense marking, number marking, case assignment, aspectual marking, person and gender markings, all of which come under the umbrella term, finiteness. The simplification is a result of a 'resetting' of LI parameters to those of English. Finiteness, according to Klein

(2009), refers to the ability of a verb to license structural case to noun phrase in subject position and the possible presence of agreement marking on the verb. Taller (2015) avers that: “strictly speaking, finiteness is a property of an entire clause, rather than just a verb, and for some languages, finiteness may well not be indicated via verbal morphology at all”. In the paper, an attempt will be made to show whether NPE exhibits finiteness or not.

The data used for this study were obtained through download video skits from the internet, Facebook, Instagram and recordings of radio programmes from some radio stations. Some examples are the different skits of *Broda Shaggi*, *Okobo and his group*, *Akpan and Oduma*, *Edo videos*, *Igbo TV* and *Bovi*. The comedians in the skits predominantly use Pidgin English in their dialogues. Broda Shaggi is a Lagos based comedian. Some of his plays used here are *Lazarus* and *A bad day at work*. *Okobo and his group* live and practice in Edo State where Pidgin has been creolized. The followings are some of his skits used for the study, *Okobo, The number one tailor*, *Okobo the bady guy*, *Okobo the married man*, *Keke babes*, *Okobo and de iron lady*, *Weak body hahaha*, etc. Akpan and Oduma’s skits titled *Bad friend* and *Two can play the game* and Bovi’s films like *Bovi and the princess*, *Bovi back to school* and *Bovi and wife’s prank* are also used.

The programmes of Osun State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC), Osogbo and Fresh FM, Ibadan conducted through Pidgin English were recorded and also used for the study. The recorded programmes were four weekly OSBC’s radio programmes, *Inside Mata* and four Fresh FM’s daily programmes, *Inside Tori*.

Attitudes towards NPE

Attitude towards NPE are ambivalent. For example, Egbokhare (2001, p. 1) quotes Jubril (1995, p. 234) to have observed that attitudes towards NPE among Nigerians range from adoration to disdain. Other scholars like Buba, Al-shujairi & Ya’u (2016), Elegu (2016), Ofulue (2012) & Akande and Salami (2010) have given accounts of opposing attitudes expressed towards NPE. Some Nigerians have negative disposition to the lingo while others are favourably disposed to it. Attitude towards NPE is however determined by one’s ethnic background and level of education. NPE to some scholars sounds like bad English since the bulk of its vocabulary is from English. Failure of some students in English is often considered as a backlash of usage of NPE. NPE is also associated with illiterate and uneducated people, that it is responsible for its description as bastardized and corrupt English. Furthermore, people do not always express strong loyalty to NPE because it is believed to be the language of the politically marginalized, economically deprived and socially disadvantaged people (Egbokhare, 2001, p. 11). The language has low status in Nigeria. It is not given any constitutional role, neither is it officially recognized. Since the language is nobody’s ethnic language, it is neither taught in schools as in the case of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the languages of the three major tribes in the country nor is a medium of instruction in school.

Lately, the resentment towards NPE is gradually given way to acceptability. The lingo is now spreading like bush fire locally and internationally. English-based pidgin was one of the eleven language services launched by BBC in 2017. It is now one of the cyber forum repertoires connecting home based Nigerians and Diasporas living in far-flung cities across the globe. One of such discussion forum is *Nairaland*. As of today, the forum has 2,384,364 members. Even though not officially recognized, NPE is being used to teach lower basic classes in Niger Delta areas (Mensah, 2012). Researches conducted both in Nigeria and abroad show that NPE is living its moment in our various higher institutions of learning. Akande & Salami (2010) who conducted a research in UNIBEN and UNILAG reported that students were favourably disposed to the use of NPE on their campuses. Their findings, however, reveal that UNIBEN students use NPE in most domains; e.g. home, school, social gathering than the UNILAG students. Buba, Al-shujairi and Yalu 2016 and Elegu (2016) observe that Nigeria students studying in Malaysian and Cyprus universities respectively use NPE to communicate with one another. NPE is also enjoying patronage where it is least expected. In 2011, Google launched its search engine in Pidgin English and in 2017 BBC launched a new site in the language. Prince Charles interacted with some guests in November, 2018 at an event in Lagos, Nigeria, where he delivered a speech, using phrases in Pidgin English: “God don butta my bread”. “If life dey show you pepper, my guy, make pepper soup”. Earlier in 2014, U.S ambassador to Nigeria, James F. Entwistle used Pidgin English during an interview at Wazobi FM in Lagos, Nigeria (npr.org, accessed 19/12/2019).

Functions of Nigeria Pidgin English

In spite of the fact that NPE is not officially recognized nor given any official status in the Nigerian constitution, the lingo has been made to perform functions which most indigenous languages cannot do. Nigeria, according to the Worldometers, in July 2017, was estimated to be about 190.9 million in population with more than 500 indigenous languages. NPE and English serve as the country Lingua Franca. More than half of Nigerian population speaks NPE as a second language. According to Ogundimu (2015, p. 21963),

Nigeria Pidgin is the most important linguistic factor in unifying a multilingual, multi-ethnic and pluralistic society like Nigeria. Its usage is wider than any of 500 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria given that all regional, religious and ethnolinguistic groups in the country speak it. While the Standard English is the language of the elites and the literates, Nigerian pidgin is the language of the masses, one does not need to go through formal education system before attaining proficiency in the language.

The use of NPE has appreciated and extended. It has become an indispensable facility for media houses seeking wider coverage and acceptability. Radio and television programmes such as newspaper reviews, sport news reviews, news bulletins, dramas, advertisements, etc. are brought to people using NPE. Adeleke

(2000, p. 16), quoting Jubril (1994, p. 233), reveals that the use of NPE on radio station is pioneered by Radio Rivers FM Station, Port Harcourt, in 1984. Since then, other radio stations such as those of Benin, Enugu, Lagos, Ogun, Oyo and Kwara, etc. have followed suit. Wazobia FM, Lagos, has almost its entire programmes broadcast in NPE.

NPE, alongside English and other ethnic languages, has become veritable a tool for advertising goods and services. NPE, as a language of advertising, is employed and utilized in both print and broadcast media to promote different companies and agencies. Telecommunication giants such as MTN, Globacom and AirtelNG advertise their products and services in NPE to reach different categories of peoples. Ogundimu (2015) observes that:

Food, culinary and beverage companies including but not limited to Lever Brothers, Nestle A&P foods, Abbe Nominee and Chi Limited all engage Nigerian Pidgin along with other languages for marketing their products. In 2011, a television advert of Indomie Noodles by Dafil Group won the advert of the year organised by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC advert report, 2011).

Religious leaders, most especially in congregations constituted by worshippers from heterogeneous linguistic backgrounds, make use of Pidgin English to address their followers. Many Pentecostal churches now adopt the patois to compose songs and proselytize. One of such songs is the one used to show the triumph of Jesus over Satan, entitled “Winner ooo”.

The song goes thus:

Winner ooo!
 Winner!
 Winner ooo!
 Winner!
 Jesus u don win o
 Winner!
 Patapata u go win forever
 Winner!
 Are u a winner?
 I am a winner in the Lord Jesus.
 Loser ooo!
 Loser!
 Loser ooo!
 Loser!
 Satan u don lose o
 Loser!
 Patapata u go lose forever
 Loser!
 Are u a loser
 I am a winner in the Lord Jesus.

The function of NPE has become more extensive as it is also used by some writers in writing plays, poetry and prose narratives (Adeleke, 2000). Poets like Aig. Imoelkhuede who wrote: “One wife one man” and “Blackman consolation”, Sir Dennis Osadebey’s “Black man trouble”, Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s “I Wan Bi President” and a host of others, write in Pidgin. Hip-pop artistes and Nigerian stand-up-comedians employ NPE to entertain their audience. It has been observed that jokes and comedies get more delectable, merrier and funnier if executed through the language. The music legend and Afrobeat leader, Fela Anikulapo Kuti used the language since 1970s until his death. Today hip-pop artistes like Adigun Alapomeji (9ice), David Adeleke (Davido), Wizkid, etc. apart from using English and their mother tongue to sing they also engage NPE to display their talents. Politicians, activists and pressure groups also use NPE for political campaigns and propagandas. The ex-presidents of Nigeria like Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan were fond of employing the language. The popular phrases ‘1 de kampe’ and ‘I de laugh o’ were made by Obasanjo when it was insinuated that he was sick and when it was reported that his former vice president, Alhaji AtikuAbubakar was eyeing presidency in 2014, respectively.

Ogundimu (2015, p. 201966) reports that during the fuel subsidy removal, strike actions and demonstrations that occurred in 2012 in most cities of Nigeria, professionals, pressure groups, proletarians use NPE as a language of solidarity and comradeship to show their displeasure to the Nigerian government. Recently, when activists were demanding for the release of Sowore, Dasuki, Bakare etc. from the custody of the DSS they partly spoke and sang in NPE.

For example:

When I remember Sowore

Water run away mi eye o

A e a e 2ce

Water run away mi eye

When I remember Dasuki

Water run away mi eye o

A e a e (2ce)

Water run away mi eye

In 2018, Charley Boy, Nigerian singer/songwriter, television presenter, publisher, producer and entertainer staged a one-man protest tagged *our mumu don do* to show his displeasure against certain policies of the Buhari led government.

Lexical Finiteness

Finiteness accounts for the changing form of a lexical item, most especially, a verb to show its usage in different grammatical contexts. In other words, it presupposes the marking of word form. Verbs are variable lexemes. They exhibit different shapes to indicate temporality, agreement, mood and aspect of a clause. English verbs, more than any other word, are richer in inflectional endings. Apart from the bare lexical

form, there are up to five other forms in the verb paradigm. The forms include: the present tense, the 3rd singular present tense (verb +s), the past tense (verb + edi), gerundive participle (verb + ing) and perfective participle (verb + en, edii). This means that finiteness has to do with inflection.

Klein (2009) citing David Crystal (1992) submits that:

Finiteness is a characteristic of a verb or construction that can occur on its own in an independent clause permitting formal contrasts of tense and mood: contrasts with a non-finite verb construction, which occurs on its own only in a dependant clause, and which lacks tense and mood contrasts: example are infinitives and participles.

The definition above portrays finiteness as an inflectional category of a verb. However, Klein (year, please) does not totally agree with the Crystal's submission above. He contends that "finiteness cannot just be an inflectional category of the verb. Verb morphology is just one way to encode it."

Finiteness could be said to be a purely syntactic property in some ways (Cowper, 2002; Klein, 2009). In the first way, it can determine word order of a clause:

- (a) The finite verb in declarative clauses always occurs as the second clausal element.
- (b) In subordinate clauses, the finite verb is in final position.
- (c) In polar questions and imperatives, the finite verb is usually bring to the clause initial position.

In another way, finiteness is a licenser. It licenses the grammatical subject to NPs in sentence initials and possible occurrence of some expletive elements. Finite verbs, in other words assign structural cases such as nominative or accusative to NPs depending on their distribution in clauses. This notion is espoused in Government and Binding (GB) Theory of the Transformational Generative Grammar. It is stated in the theory that the "nominative case is assigned to the NP specifier of I [+Fin]" and the 'accusative case is assigned to the NP sister of V or P' (Black 1998). The non-finite verb is not imbued with the capacity to license or give structural case to NP.

Finiteness in the garb of inflection provides grammatical information on the following formal features of a clause:

- (a) gender - masculine, feminine or neuter
- (b) person - first, second or third person
- (c) number - singular/plural
- (d) tense - present or past
- (e) aspect - perfective or progressive
- (f) mood - indicative, subjunctive, imperative
- (g) voice - active or passive

Finiteness in NPE

The various syntactic relations with regard to tense, number, person, gender, case, modal, aspect etc. appear to be marked by grammaticalization in NPE. Different

sentences taken from our data seems to conform to this submission. In what follows, analysis of finiteness as it is operated in NPE is carried out.

Finiteness of Case

Pronouns in English are words that mostly exhibit overt case system, in the sense that, different pronoun forms can be used for different grammatical positions. For example, VP can assign nominative case to *I, we, he, she, they*, etc.; accusative to *me, us, him, her, it*, and *them* and *mine, his, hers, ours, its, theirs* are the genitive case. Sometimes, this may not seem to be applicable in NPE.

Examples from NPE

1. Me no dey there o
Ist SG NEG PRES there o
I am not involved
2. Dem sey I bi mad.
3rd PL say I be mad.
They say I am mad.
3. Una no dey folo we
2 nd PL NEG PRES follow pro
You cannot follow us.
4. Na we we
3rd SG + BE PRES Pr o
It is us.

The subjective NPS as illustrated in 1 & 2 above appeared in objective forms *me* and *dem* while the objective NPS in 3 and 4 took the subjective form of *we* and *we* as opposed to English *I, they, us & us* respectively. By implication, if those sentences above were made in English, the choice of *me* and *dem* as nominative ‘NPS’ and ‘we’ as accusative ‘NPS’ has violated the rules of selectional restriction and strict sub-categorization and will therefore be rendered ill-formed. However, Pidgins and creoles (Nigerian Pidgin inclusive) are not systematic like English (Mensah, 2012).

Finiteness of Gender

Unlike English that makes gender distinction most especially in pronouns, NPE appears to hardly make gender distinctions - *e* is used for *he, she, and it*; and *am, it, his* and *her* most especially in the baselectal variety.

For example:

5. If e pain you, go and hug transformer.
If 3rd SG PRE you, go and hug transformer.
If it does not please you, go and commit suicide.
6. E no kom
3rdSG NEG come
S/he does not come
7. E dey run mit im pikin
3rdSG BE run meet PRO child

- S/he is running to meet his or her child
8. Dem no dey carry am go an bring am come
3rd PL NEG AUX carry 3SG Go conjunction bring 3SG kom
They cannot take he/she/it away and bring him/her it back.

From the examples above, *e* was used as 3rd person singular in subject position to represent masculine, feminine and neuter gender. No distinction could therefore be made to differentiate among the three. It is only the context of usage that can aid the understanding of the sex of the person being talked about. The same thing is applicable to *am*. *Am* in NPE can stand for any 3rd person singular pronoun in the object position. It appears that no restriction is placed on what gender the two words can represent. NPE can therefore be said to allow a greater degree of multi functionality of the two words as opposed to their English counterparts that are gender specific. The finitude of gender with reference to pronoun can therefore be hardly determined.

Finiteness of Tense and Aspect

Tense and aspect in NPE are not morphologically marked but lexicalized or grammaticalized. According to Mensah (2012, p. 172), some verbs undergo changes from lexemes to auxiliaries and complementizer while others encode temporal constituency of a situation.

NPE uses *bin*, *dey* and *go* to express past, present and future tenses respectively while *don* and *dey* are used for perfective and progressive aspects, respectively. The following sentences are in the past tense form.

9. A bin house dat tam
A SG PAST home that time
I was at home by that time
10. E bin waka go
3rdPL past walk go
S/he walked away.

Present Tense

11. Di man dey there
Det man PRESENT there
The man is there
12. Hunger dey waya mi
Hunger PRES beat me
I am feeling hungry
13. E chop rice
3rd SG chop rice
S/he eats rice.
14. Dem buy new moto
3 PL buy new motor
They buy a new motor/car

Future Tense

15. Dem go go

3 PL FUT Go

They will go

16. Nkem go chop rice.
Nkem FUT eat rice.
NKem will eat rice.

Perfective Aspect

17. Di girl don finish.
Det girl ASP finish.
The girl has finished.
18. We don setul di mata
1st PL PERFASP settle Det matter
We have resolved the issue

Progressive Aspect

19. Dem dey com
3 rd PL PROG come
They are coming.
20. ME I dey pass di junction.
1st SING PROG pass DET junction
I am passing through the junction

From the illustrative examples above, it is shown that there is clear loss of inflection in NPE. Unlike English which has inflectional morphemes for each of its tenses and aspects, nothing of such can be found in NPE. The lexeme *bin* which is NPE derivative of the English primary auxiliary verb *be* is used to express pastness in the language. As it can be seen in the two sentences under past tense above, *bin* preceded the lexical verbs and did not impose selectional restriction on them. It also works with both singular and plural agentive subjects, *A* and *dem* respectively. *Bin* indicates that the situation talked about had happened in the near or remote past. It therefore grammaticalizes as a past tense marker in NPE. Lexical verbs of NPE are not seemed to be ingrained to show finitude of pastness.

To indicate time relation with reference to present tense, the word *dey* is mostly used as copula in NPE as it was illustrated in sentences under the present tense above, on the one hand. On the other hand, a base form of the verb is used to indicate present the time irrespective of number indicated in the external argument (subject). As it was also shown above, *Dey* in 11 and 12, *chop* and *buy* 13 and 14 respectively indicate that the state of being and action being expressed in those sentences are just taking place. Finiteness with regard to present tense in NPE shows that *dey* cannot change its form to mark number of subject neither can the main verb do. There is therefore no selectional restriction to what number of subject (either singular or plural) a verb can select.

Just like English that uses *shall* and *will*, NPE shows futurity through the grammaticalized lexical item *go*. *Go*, here, does not signify movement or directionality. According to Mensah (2012, p. 174), the acquisition of the property

of future tense by the *go* is brought about by the complex interplay between the need for expressivity and creativity on the one hand and regulation and routinization on the other.

As it is evident in the examples under the future tense above, *go* is used to show intention for the activities expressed by the main verbs to take place in the near future. However, *go* does not inflect to reflect a change in number indicated by subjects in the examples given. To show its lack of finiteness, it does not impose restriction on the number signified by its agentive nominal. It can therefore co-occur with both singular and plural subjects. NPE expresses completion of process indicated in the verb phrase through a grammaticalized lexical item *don* – a derivative from the English (its superstrate) auxiliary *do*. *Don* is used in NPE as perfective aspectual marker. However, it does not have variants as English *have* does.

Den, as it is used in the examples under the perfective aspect above, shows that the processes expressed by the main verbs in those examples have been completed as at the time of speaking. *Don* does not however change its form to reflect a change in the number of subject or a change in the time of action just like a finite verb will do in English.

Don seems to be introduced because of the need for expressivity or marking of process completion in NPE verb phrase. It is bereft of semantic and grammatical properties associated with the auxiliary *do* and *have*. It only serves as the perfective aspectual marker. Also, the participial inflectional morpheme *en* that hops on any verbal element following *have* in English verb phrase is lacking in NPE. It cannot impose selectional restriction on the number of its agentive nominal, nor determining the lexeme of its principal verb.

On the progressive aspect, *dey* that serves as present tense marker in NPE can also be used to perform the function of progressive aspectual marker. *Dey* as it used in the illustrative examples under progressive aspect above, shows that the process conveyed by the verbal groups are still ‘on going’ as at the time of speaking. It plays the role which the auxiliary *be* plays in English. However, unlike *be* which has different morpho-syntactic realizations such as *is, are, was, were, be* etc., *dey* is static. It lacks formal features to determine whether its subject will be singular or plural. The *-ing* inflectional morpheme of progressive aspect cannot be marked on a verb in NPE.

Summary of Findings

So far, the study has examined the state of finitude in Nigerian Pidgin English. It was shown through our analysis that finiteness in NPE cannot be expressed through verbal morphology or verbal personal endings. This means that morphosyntactic information about finiteness cannot be expressed on a main verb or an auxiliary. Temporality, number marking and aspectual marking are carried out through

grammaticalization. We therefore agree with Taller (2015) that in some languages finiteness may well not be indicated via verbal morphology at all. NPE morphosyntactic information is not influenced by its lexifier, rather it has its own unique grammar.

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