

## **Bridging the Language Divide: The Search for Quality and the Pidgin English Question in Nigerian Drama**

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### **Abstract**

The language of drama in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria has become not only an issue of academic discourse but a major social phenomenon. Over the years we have seen the gradual but potent attempt to decolonize and rescue Nigerian drama from the ideological contraptions of the West. Part of this struggle is manifested in the fusion of the Pidgin English in our play texts. This paper therefore examines this trend, its ideological framework vis-à-vis the social realities of present day Nigeria. It is an attempt at demystifying the Pidgin English as well as evaluating its relevance for modern Nigerian drama in its quest to put Nigeria in the global political and economic stage.

### **Introduction**

Language has become a veritable issue when it comes to writing in Africa. This challenge becomes more visible in Nigeria when considered from the standpoint of the multilingual and multicultural character of the Nigerian state. With our contact with the white man through colonialism, the issue of language became more complex as the English language replaced local languages in most Nigerian and African literature. The English language particularly in Nigeria became the means through which knowledge can be passed on from one generation to another.

In the field of dramatic literature, we have witnessed in the last six decades different transitions in the use of the English language in most African writings. Some writers have local languages all in a bid to decolonize African literature. Others have picked up common languages spoken in the streets such as Pidgin in most of their writings. This paper takes a look at this trend and what necessitated writers to do away with colonial tendencies in Nigerian dramatic literature.

### **The Pidginization of Nigerian Drama and Class Relations in Nigeria**

Raymond Williams conceived language as an instrument used by men for specific and distinguishable purposes. (Williams 1977). Over the years, we have seen

that the English language in Nigeria has become a distinguishing factor in various forms of human relationships. The English language is conceived as the language of the elites while the Pidgin is seen as the language of the street – those who belong to the lower cadre of society. Most African and indeed Nigerian writers of Marxist leaning have since fused the Pidgin language in their works to reflect the social realities within the society. Famous for this is Femi Osofisan whose play – Once Upon Four Robbers is lavished with the Pidgin English.

The earliest trend we find in early Nigerian dramatists is that of the use of old-fashioned language. Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Michael Echeruo among others are considered to belong to this school. Chinweizu accused Nigerian practitioners of poetry particularly the Ibadan – Nsukka school of displaying glaring faults. “Their language is old-fashioned, craggy and unmusical. The diction is obscure and inaccessible”. (Chinweizu, 1980). Referring to the Soyinka generation of writers, Chinweizu says their language is archaic: “they seem to pattern their language after 19<sup>th</sup> century or even 16<sup>th</sup> century British writers”. (Chinweizu, 1980). He believes that their works are replete with Shakespeareanisms and Latinisms. “Wole Soyinka’s syntax and verbal structure is Shakespearian,” He says.

While we are not in a position to rescue Soyinka from the so-called classicist contraptions made of him, suffice to say that Soyinka himself has been quite critical of the European or Western conventions of drama:

The serious divergencies between a traditional African approach to drama and the European will be found more accurately in what is a recognizable Western cast of mind, ... it is not only mechanistic but represents a period technology which marked yet another phase of Western man’s comprehensive world-view. (Soyinka, 1975).

Most of Soyinka’s plays in the last two decades reveal a complete departure from Shakespearean classicism to more radically minded ones. In The Beatification of the Area Boy, Soyinka deploys lavishly the Pidgin English to reflect the socio-cultural milieu of the play. This dramatic text which can best be described as a prophetic commentary on the 1999-2007 Obasanjo regime, uses Pidgin to capture in trans-historic terms the political transition and

economic crimes of the Obasanjo years. Blind Minstrel, one of the characters in the play says:

One twin go slap, the other go turn cheek and soon  
they're playing hide and seek. Sixteen billion  
dollars or more wey be windfall from Saddam's war  
vanish for air like harmattan dust. Twin seek cry,  
haba, this country go bust. (Soyinka, 1999).

This clearly indicates that the artist in the traditional African milieu spoke for and his community. It further amplifies Chinweizu's belief that the imagery, symbolism and forms must be drawn from a communally accessible pool. "He was heard. He made sense. When you cannot speak to your people, there is a burning temptation either to speak to yourself (private mysticism)." (Chinweizu, 1980). Ideally, he said, African literature should be written in African languages but was pessimistic on its workability:

The same historical circumstances that presently compel African nations to use Western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them. Until those historical circumstances are changed - and we hope they change soon - it is pointless debating whether or not to use these Western languages in our literature. (Chinweizu, 1980).

This is the dilemma most writers face when it comes to the language question. Ngugi Wa Thiongo attempted to write using his own indigenous language and even produced plays in his local dialect in what appears to be a home-grown theatre in Kenya. Yet this is a far-cry in terms of how successful and effective this has been. Back home in Nigeria, we have witnessed attempts at using local languages in literature. S.O.O. Amali wrote plays in English and translated some into Idoma - The Leaders is a case in point. But with over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria it becomes rather a very complex situation as writers would have to grapple with the reality of navigating through these languages to reach out to the people.

### **The Politics and Economy of the Pidgin English**

The Pidgin English has become one of the means most contemporary writers have adopted to bring their message down, demystify the web and narrow the gap the English language has created for all of us. Aside from this, there is also the economic and political dimension. The population of Pidgin English speakers has grown over the years. It is fast becoming the language of the Nigerian economy. Market women, farmers, artisans, transporters, etc communicate effectively using this language. It is the language of business transaction. The literacy gap in Nigeria is very wide and majority of the populace can only access the Pidgin English. This obviously cuts them off from the corridors of power and the echelons of the economy which uses the English language as its modus operandi. A dramatist then must give credence to a mode of expression that appeal not only to the literate class but the generality of the people who can understand only the Pidgin English. Nigerian Pidgin is distinguished from other 400 or so Nigerian languages and dialects by the fact that it is spoken by members of every regional, ethno-linguistic and religious group in the federation. Official attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin remain negative, perpetuating erroneous notions inherited from the colonial period that Nigerian Pidgin is some form of "broken English". Faraclas emphatically states that:

"There is no Creole language worldwide with nearly as many speakers as Nigerian Pidgin. ... Nigerian Pidgin can be considered to be functionally a Creole, given the fact that it is used by a great number of people as their principal means of communication in all their daily activities. (Faraclas, 2008).

UNESCO statistics put Nigeria's literacy level at 70.7%. (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). This only applies to those who are able to read and write. It then implies that for drama to have a wider acceptability and contribute to the political and economic discourse of our time, a much more popular language like the Pidgin is of great necessity.

However, the use of the Pidgin has not been without some skepticism mostly amongst Western scholars. Some like Herman believe that the Pidgin does not qualify as a language: "Strictly speaking, Pidgin English is more a jargon than it is a dialect. But ... it is one of the most widely spoken jargons in the world ... a sort of short hand language". (Herman & Herman, 1978).

It is quite understandable why Herman describes the Pidgin English as jargon himself being English. However, it is estimated that as at 1978, 50 million people use it as a means of verbal communication. (Herman & Herman, 1978). This number 32 years after would have risen to 250 million by now. All along the China coast, in the South Seas, on practically all the Pacific Islands, in the Malay Peninsula, on the west coast of Africa, in the Australian bush, in parts of India, Egypt and the Near East and even on west coast of the United States, some form of Pidgin English is spoken. In Ghana 'Kru' English or Pidgin is very widely used in the larger towns, but is not current among educated Ghanaians. (Magnus, 1999). One significant issue here is that it is a language originating from the coastal lands and spreading further to the hinterlands as humans continue to interact.

Another important fact to denote at this point is that the word Pidgin is derived from the Chinese pronunciation of "business". It is described as the language used by the Chinese to transact their business with the English speaking people. (Herman, 1978). In China, where so many dialects of the Chinese language are spoken, the people are forced to resort to Pidgin as a medium which is commonly understood among them. The Western Powers reached only a few ports, and one linguistic consequence of that limited contact was the development of Pidgin varieties. The development of the Pidgin English there reflected the Chinese "Middle Kingdom" conception of the universe. Moreover, the Chinese held the British, like all "foreign devils", in low esteem, and would not stoop to learn the foreign tongue in its full form. (Cheng, 1992). Elsewhere in America, the Pidgin stripped of inflections and much of its power and subtlety, became the language of communication when Indian and Englishmen met, although neither spoke it elsewhere. Miller in one of her conceptual analysis of this trend states that:

There is slender but unmistakable evidence that circumstances forced the development of a Pidgin between Indian and Settler soon after the English arrived on the North American continent and that this miniature language has continued to exist down to the present. (Miller, 1967).

This scenario is quite synonymous with the Nigerian experience. The Pidgin is quite popular among the diverse ethnic nationalities as a means of interaction and its origin is similar to the coastal experience in the early stages of Nigeria's contact with the British. Since then the Pidgin English has grown and has

continued to acquire new terminologies to enrich its undocumented vocabulary. Faraclas' studies on the Nigerian Pidgin shows that a conservative number of people who speak the Nigerian Pidgin as a second language has exceeded 40 million and the number of first language speakers has already surpassed 1 million. Both of these numbers are increasing rapidly, given the popularity of the language among young people who make up a majority of the national population. (Faraclas, 1996). All arts forms including film, music, drama, folklore, etc, have continued to tap from its wealth of opportunities. No doubt, its ardent subscribers have continued to smile to the bank as the Pidgin unlocks many doors hitherto closed by the Queen's English. With its wide acceptability, politicians, writers, businessmen and many others who want to reach out and win the hearts of the masses find it necessary to communicate with the Pidgin.

### **Conclusion**

It is not in doubt that the Pidgin English has come to stay within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. Despite it being labeled as degenerate and jargon by Western European apologists, it forms the basis for which human relationships are defined in Nigeria. Although not officially recognized or spoken, yet if the dramatist must reach out to the society and feel the pulse of the Nigerian people, then the Pidgin English is of great necessity.

We live in a society where majority of our populace are alienated by the language question. Who you are, where you come from and where you belong is defined by the language you speak. The Pidgin English is a bridge-builder; it has no class or creed, a common denominator. It is accessible to everyone yet not exclusive to any tribe or tongue. It is a language that is yearning for recognition and Nigerian literature especially drama has the potential to sell this language to the rest of the world.

There is need to effectively mediate the challenging political and economic crises we face in this country. The Pidgin is not only a language that reflects the realities of modern Nigeria but a tool to effectively empower the people.

Contemporary writers especially dramatists should do more in fusing the Pidgin in their play texts. The more plays are performed in Pidgin, the more effective will drama be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria.

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**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Emmanuel E.U. (2013), *Bridging the Language Divide: The Search for Quality and the Pidgin English Question in Nigerian Drama*, *J. of Arts and Contemporary Society*, Vol.5, No.2, Pp. 1-7.

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