

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN DELTA STATE

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Abstract

The diversity of cultures that finds expression in the English language is a reminder that the history of the English language is a story of cultures over the years. The English language has come in contact with different cultures of the world. This paper dwells on the historical development of the English language in Delta State, with reference to the events that led to the introduction of the English language in Delta State and the periods during which these events took place. It goes in a chronological order from the initial trade-driven contact, colonial administration and subsequent indigenization of the language into a unique Nigerian variety with Pidgin English playing a particularly significant and unifying role in the region's diverse linguistic landscape. The paper through historiography explains the evolution of the English language in Delta State over time in order to foster a more discerning view from the past to the present usage of the language.

Keywords: History, Historiography, Standard English, Pidgin English, Indigenous language.

Introduction

The English language is a West Germanic language that originated in England. The earliest forms of English were spoken by the Anglo-Saxons, who settled in England in the 5th century. When they came, they brought their own language, which was called Old English. The English language has changed in different aspects, ranging from its grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and other areas. This brings us to the division of the English language, which is: The Old English ((5th-11th Centuries), the Middle English period (11th-15th centuries), and the modern period(16th century to present). Different countries use English in the world as either a first language, a second language, or a foreign language. Thus, Kachru classified the English language into three classes of usage: English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Nigeria uses English as a second language because, before the colonial masters came into the country, there were different indigenous languages used across the country. In Delta State, there were languages like the Urhobo, Isoko, Anioma, Ijaw, Itsekiri, etc. Due to its multilingual and ethnic diversity, there was a need for a common language for inter-ethnic communication. At the time, Nigerian pidgin became the lingua franca. It was used in informal settings like markets in the Warri and Sapele areas where trade took place while English language was used in government, education and other formal settings.

In Nigeria, the English language came in through the colonial masters, either for trading, slavery, colonization, and missionary activities by the Europeans. It was one of the legacies the British left behind after their departure. It serves as a mode of unity because Nigeria is a multilingual nation. The language functions in different ways in the country; it is the country's official language, it is the language of business, it is used in churches, schools and so on.

The major focus in this paper is on the historical development of the English language in Delta state with reference to the events that led to the introduction of the English language in the state and the periods during which these events took place. This goes in a chronological order from the initial trade-driven contact, colonial administration, and subsequent indigenization of the language into a unique Nigerian variety alongside the pidgin English that also played a unique role in informal settings.

This work is in line with Schneider's dynamic Model of Nigerian English, which is also diachronic because it describes and analyses the historical and still-continuing evolution of such varieties.

Postcolonial Englishes, as defined by Schneider in D. Jowitt (2025), are varieties of English that have developed in parts of the world to which English was transplanted in the past as a result of the enterprise of a colonizing power or its citizens, this power in most cases being Britain. Nigeria falls under those countries that was colonized by the British; thus, they have their variety which has been developing right from the colonial era. Going further, Jowitt explains that colonization eras of different types: 'trade', 'plantation', 'settlement', and 'exploitation'. The first two led to the development of English-lexified pidgins and creoles, while the development of new varieties of standard English is associated with the latter two. Schneider made a distinction between the Settlers Strand (STL strands) and the Indigenes Strand (IDG Strand). This brings us to contact of both strands, which leads to the postcolonial strands. The above refers to those who own English as a Native Language ((ENL) and English as a Second Language where Nigeria falls into. The STL Englishes are those whose settlers took over the land and whose descendants form a majority of the population, while the IDG Englishes are those whose settlers did not take over the land permanently, thereby leaving the population to be made up of indigenes.

The evolution of the English language in Nigeria/Delta state has gone through several historical stages. The researcher explains these stages thus:

1. The Base: This explains the arrival of the colonial masters who come from different parts of their country, thus making them have different dialects of their language. In this case, the Britons in Nigeria were from different parts of Britain; these dialects come in contact to form an entirely new variety, which is the base as a result of contact in the place where they have settled, in this case, Delta State in Nigeria.
2. Borrowing: This phase brings to mind that the original settlers are the Britains thus the Standard British English is learnt, but contact makes them borrow lexical items from indigenous languages. A story has it that the white man around Delta state heard someone say "Dick che ole na re" which meant in Urhobo that Dick has sold the yam

completely. The man turned it to Idickitionare, where it is believed that the word 'Dictionary' was gotten.

3. Nativisation: Due to the environment where English is used, in Delta State, the knowledge of English is widespread among the indigenes, with a great extent of lexical borrowing from indigenous languages, in order for English to be domesticated in its new environment
4. Endornomative Stabilization: The colony that was once colonized has become an independent state in the case of Nigeria, but English was retained, not just retained, but is now the lingua Franca of the country, used in formal setting aand pidgin is used in informal settings before now and presently used in schools as it is being taught as courses in the university.
5. Differentiation: Once there is a variety which is stable, there is bound to be a subvariety as a result of social and regional differences. In the case of Delta State, the use of pidgin English, which unifies the different ethnic groups in the state, varies in different regions of the state. Hence, we have warri pidgin, sapele pidgin and so on.

In using historiography, we shall study the history of the English language in the world, Nigeria and in particular, Delta State.

Development of English in the world

It is pertinent to know the structure of the language that is used in every facet of life (English language), But it is reasonable to assume that a liberally educated person should know something of the structure of his or her language, its position in the world and its relation to other tongues, the wealth of its vocabulary together with the sources from which that vocabulary has been and is being enriched, and the complex relationships among the many different varieties of speech that are gathered under the single name of the English language. The diversity of cultures that find expression in it is a reminder that the history of English is a story of cultures in contact during the past 1,500 years. It understates matters to say that political, economic, and social forces influence a language. These forces shape the language in every aspect, most obviously in the number and spread of its speakers, and in what is called "the sociology of language.". but also in the meanings of words, in the accents of the spoken language, and even in the structures of the grammar. The history of a language is intimately bound up with the history of the peoples who speak it (Baugh, A.C. & Cable, T., 2002:1).

The English language is a global language. What makes it a global language? According to David Crystal (2003) A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. English is a global language, they would say. You hear it on television spoken by politicians from all over the world. Wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements. Whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu.

Development of English in Nigeria

Existing studies recognize Portuguese as the first European language to reach Nigeria in the 15th century through Portuguese merchants (Adetugbo, 1978). This is seen in the presence of several Portuguese words such as *sabi*, *pikin* or *dash*. These words are used in Nigerian pidgin; some are gaining way into the acrolectal variety of Nigerian English (Jowitt, 2019). The above words are from Portuguese *saber* meaning 'know', *Pequeno*, meaning 'small' or 'child', and 'dar', meaning 'give'. There was then the invasion of the British Merchants in the 16th Century, but it did not see the light of day as this brought a challenge between the Portuguese and the British, which forced the British merchants to return to Britain. In the 17th century, the British merchants returned and established a stronger trading contact; they began to replace English with Portuguese as the language for trade. The introduction of the slave trade led to the use of English for this trade. This led to the training of interpreters in the use of English so they could stand as middlemen between the Nigerian slave dealers and the Europeans in the ports of Bonny, Calabar, Benin, Lagos and the Niger Delta across the Atlantic Ocean. Some of the enslaved people were forced to learn English also. Some of them settled in Freetown (Sierra Leone) others traced their roots to Nigeria and settled in Lagos and Abeokuta (Adetugbo, 1978) after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. These returnees added to the number of those who spoke English in Nigeria.

There was a variety of English, called the non-standard English, widely used between 1842 and 1926 (Ommolewa M. 1979). 1842 was the time the missionaries came into Nigeria, but the English language was already spoken before their arrival, even though the one spoken was termed by Omolewa as non-standard English. There was, however, an Educational Ordinance of 1926 which gave prominence to the need for a proper use of English.

In looking at the history of English in Nigeria and how it has evolved over the years we must give a brief history of how the English language (standard or working English) came into the country, language is used by people for communication, different people have different languages; it is as a result of these people coming in contact with each other that a common language is chosen for use to aid communication. When the missionaries arrived in Nigeria, there were many options for them to use in communicating with the indigenes. First, they thought of using interpreters who were versed in English and the indigenous language; secondly, they were willing to learn the indigenous language in order to spread the message of Christ. It wasn't an easy journey as Nigerians, especially in Yoruba land, didn't see the need to learn a foreign language, as they saw the whites as spirits and that famine would befall any land that welcomed them; some of them also believed that their language was an effective tool for communication. As the day went by, some persons, especially those who worked with the whites as cooks, stewards, gardeners, interpreters and teachers, needed to communicate with them; they accepted the language as they saw it as a liberation from oppression to which they were subjected by the indigenous society. The English masters, according to Professor Ajayi were another set of people who saw the welcoming of the English language as a road to success and advancement. Furthermore, in 1914, there was a need for the adoption of a common language as a means to communicate in a vast economy.

In a work of Nigerian spoken English, Munzali (1979) explains that “Nigerian English is a term that has come to be recognized and accepted as a legitimate subtype of English. he however, gave a distinction between the spoken and written form; people are identified with their pronunciation as to the ethnic group they belong. earlier, we explained that language comes in contact because of the people that use it, the emergence of the English language into Nigeria came into contact with Nigerian local languages, and thus Mobolaji A. (1979) says it comes in contact with local ideas, local environment, local attributes to life, and will also reflect its local colour. This, therefore, means that the English used in Nigeria reveals, in varying degrees, linguistic influence at the morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels in the way Nigerians speak the English language.

Nigerian English refers to ‘the phonological, grammatical, and lexical properties that distinguish the English used in Nigeria from varieties of English elsewhere’ (Jowitt, 2019, p. 1). This perspective focuses on the specific linguistic features that distinguish Nigerian English from other varieties of English. It highlights the unique phonological (pronunciation), grammatical (sentence structure) and lexical (vocabulary) characteristics that have emerged due to the interaction of English with Nigerian languages and cultural contexts.

Nigerian English, as explained by Adegbija (2004) are English used in Nigeria, which reflects Nigerian cultural realities and the needs and assumptions of Nigerian learners.

Ugwuanyi O.K and Aboh S.C (2025). The increasing use of Nigerian English and its promotion as a legitimate variety of English has resulted in a burgeoning of research on the variety from a wide range of linguistic standpoints (Jowitt, 2019; also see Jowitt & Ugwuanyi, 2025, in this issue for an overview). Following Walsh's (1967) pioneering work on Nigerian English, arguments for and against the existence of Nigerian English were particularly rife in the mid-20th century. Scholars who argue against the existence of Nigerian English as a legitimate variety of English (Eyisi, 2003; Vincent, 1974) perceive it as usage errors and deficits that must be discarded in favour of Received Pronunciation. Jowitt (2019) refers to this group of scholars as rejecters and prescriptivists. Scholars favouring Nigerian English (Bamgbose, 1982; Jowitt, 2019) see it as a legitimate variety of English that deserves sustained scholarly attention. As is, the debate on whether there is a Nigerian English variety has waned because there have been increasing discussions of Nigerian English both in academic and non-academic spaces. Further argument in support of the status of Nigerian English as an independent variety of English is that it meets the four criteria used to classify New Englishes (Brunner, 2017). First, Nigerian English developed as a result of British colonialism and spread through education. Second, Nigerian English is spoken in a multilingual society in which it co-exists alongside many Nigerian languages. Third, it performs formal and official functions in sites of power, such as education, media and business. Finally, Nigerian English results from the nativisation of English in Nigeria, as evidenced by the presence of specific phonetic patterns, unique grammatical structure and local vocabulary items.

The history of the English language in Delta State.

Delta state was carved out of the former Bendel state in 1991. It is a state that is home to different languages, people, and traditions. It has twenty five local government areas; amongst

the notable languages spoken in Delt State are Urhobo seen as the most populous in the state, Isoko, Uvwie, which share similarities with Urhobo, Itsekiri; they have cultural and linguistic relationships with the Yoruba people and Edo people, Okpe though a dialect of Urhobo but distinct enough to be understood as a language, Ijaw, Ukwuani (Ndokwa) and Anioma which covers Asaba, Ika, Ogwashi-uku, etc these are also called Delta Igbo because they are closely related to Igbo.

Just as the English language came into Nigeria, Delta State was not left out. There was early trade contact in the 17th and 18th centuries, when English traders visited the ports of the Niger Delta (ancient ports of Warri and Benin). The language for communication was, as Omolewa M. 1979 put it, a non-standard English, and pidgin was used for communication. As a result of this trade, there was a need for the indigenes to learn English to enable them transact in their business with ease. The coming of the missionaries in the 19th century into Badegry spread through to southern Nigeria, and they used the English language as a medium of evangelization and education. During this period, evangelization spread English to other parts of Nigeria, especially beyond the coastal communities in southern Nigeria, where the Delta State falls. The missionaries built churches and schools where new converts in communities within the state were taught so they could read the bible, serve as interpreters and convert others. (Adetugbo, 1978) explained how parents gave positive attitudes, which led to the emergence of 36,000 pupils in mission and government primary schools in southern Nigeria in 1913, where Delta State is situated.

Being a multilingual state, there was a need for a common language which will be understood by all. Communication is hindered due to the use of different languages and people not being able to understand each other as a result of this. The people of the state adopted the English language as their official language. They also use pidgin English for informal occasions.

It was difficult bringing the English language to be used as a means of communication in a place where people spoke different languages, as this was seen in (Omolewa 1979:17)) as most Nigerians believed their language was an effective tool for communication, hence, no need for learning a foreign language. This was not possible as the most decisive factor that generates adoption for a new language is contact. The contact of the British with Nigeria's indigenous communities called for the adoption of the English language. The language was gradually adopted as chiefs like Chief Nana Olomu of Ebrohimi emerged as powerful indigenous entrepreneurs who traded with the British, though these relationships eventually became contentious as European commercial and political interests intensified. Those who sought refuge in the white man's employment also saw the English language as liberation. Headmasters, according to Professor Ajayi, saw the learning of the English language as a road to success and advancement. The language used, however, during 1842-1926, was termed by Omolewa as non-standard English.

Schools were established by the missionaries in the coastal areas. These schools led to the spread of the English language. Interpreters were trained in order for them to work with the whites in spreading the gospel of Christ. Another important contact and use of the English language in Delta State was the establishment of infrastructure, such as the Lander Brothers Anchorage in Asaba, by the British administration.

In the 15th -18th centuries, English functioned as a trade language used mainly along the coast and riverine areas. The trade done at the time was the slave trade. After the abolition of the slave trade, the inhabitants began trading in palm oil. Communication was difficult; there emerged a simplified form of English that evolved into Nigerian Pidgin.

Another important spread of English was the influence of the missionaries in the 19th century. They needed interpreters in the spreading of the gospel; these interpreters were taught to read and write. They stood as a bridge between the people and the missionaries. The colonial administration of the British during the late 19th to mid 20th century, the colonial administration of the British established English to be used in government, courts, as a medium of instruction in higher levels of education; its knowledge was important for employment during this period.

One of the major developments of English in Delta State is the inception of various institutions. Amongst them are the College of Education, Abraka (1969), which was affiliated to the University of Benin (1982). It grew with high standards, and the department of English and literary studies began from this institution. There was a merger with the Bendel State University in 1985, where English became a unit within the department of Arts Education. In 1992, there was the establishment of Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, where the unit then became the autonomous Department of English and Literary Studies in the Faculty of Arts, where undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are offered.

Today, Institutions like the University of Delta Agbor, Michael and Cecilia Ibru University Agbara-Otor, Edwin Clark University Kiagbodo, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, amongst other institutions, are centers for academic study of the English Language in the state.

The role of the English Language in Delta State.

The English language has played a very important role in the development of Delta State since its creation in 1991. It is a powerful medium of communication in a multilingual state like Delta. It serves as a language of education, government, and commerce, providing access to higher education and career opportunities both locally and globally. It has been a meeting point in bringing the state together because of its numerous ethnic groups. It has helped in creating endless opportunities both within and outside the state. The power of the English language cannot be underemphasized as it is used as a means of instruction in schools from primary to higher institutions in the state. It has been made compulsory by JAMB for a candidate to pass it, among other subjects, in order to gain admission into any tertiary institution, both within and outside the State. It is also used in planning the curriculum

The spread of the English language has had both positive and negative influences. Positive in the sense that it has helped in vocabulary expansion of new words from our local languages into the dictionary. This wouldn't have been possible if there were no contact between the English language and the indigenous languages spoken in Delta state. The negative aspect includes the loss of local languages. English is used in both formal and informal settings, thereby leading to the loss of our local languages. Most parents do not use local languages at

home with their children, thereby abandoning their roots and imbibing the English language as their mother tongue.

The role of Pidgin English in Delta State

The Nigerian pidgin came into existence during the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of contact between Britons and Africans involved in the Atlantic slave trade. In the 2010s, a common orthography was developed for pidgin, which has been gaining significant popularity in giving the language a uniform writing system.

From its history, Nigerian pidgin has been a language of trade. It was formed through the blend of Nigerian indigenous languages when there was a need for Nigerians to interact and trade with foreigners. It was so in the Niger Delta region but presently, it is moving from its status as a trade language to becoming the native language of some communities in Nigeria (Igboanusi, 2008) even though it has not been given an official status. This is seen in the Warri and Sapele area of Delta state, where the Warri Pidgin and Sapele Pidgin are seen and used in daily communication, thereby giving it a high status. This is so because in Warri, we have the Urhobos, Ijaw, and Itsekiris dominating the environment. A child who is born and bred in rural areas in this environment will grow up with pidgin English as their mother tongue. According to Aziza R (2019), most youths in the Warri area communicate fluently only in Nigerian pidgin, and their general attitude towards the use of local languages is poor. Pidgin is a language variety that is formed with the intention to fill an urgent communication gap. Pidgin operates or functions like English as it has both countable and uncountable nouns because there are many varieties of pidgin in the modern world just like English. Pidgin is made up of a combination of two components. They are English and indigenous language for instance, in a sentence like: why you say you nor go give me garri. 'Garri' in the sentence is an indigenous language, not an English word. Pidgin begins as a second language; this means there is already an existing first language. Pidgin is used for a limited purpose, such as trade. In markets, it is used to communicate between the educated and market women, it is also used to communicate between two ethnic groups in the south-south. Where there is no common language pidgin English thrives. Delta state is one of such states where pidgin English is used for communication among the market woman, touts, different ethnic groups etc. pidgin English has an informal tone which conveys solidarity and familiarity; this is seen in schools where students around the Delta area, tend to use pidgin English as against the English language which should be used in a formal setting; it is also used by lecturers who are close to communicate because of their existing relationship.

In the past, pidgin was conceived or regarded as a debased form of the standard language i.e not speaking a language the way it should be spoken; it is used by those who could not speak standard English very well. However, in recent times, the linguists regard pidgins as languages that require or deserve recognition hence, presently it is being studied in schools, It is used by educated elites such as famous writers in their texts to portray the characters for identification of the characterization of the characters thus pidgin serves as a tool for the authors to project their messages clearly; they also use it to project the culture of the people they are writing about i.e the way the people talk or use language. for instance, Chinua Achebe uses pidgin to state a proverb, " the lizard when fall from iroko tree say if nobody praise me I go

praise myself”. There are indigenous ideas that standard English cannot capture; in this case pidgin English can convey it for instance, the word “iroko tree” is not from standard English but our indigenous language. pidgin is injected into educated works for jocular and familiar reasons for their readers.

Some Nigerian communities, like some communities in Delta state, have more than six distinct but mutually unintelligible languages. This makes communication among neighbours difficult. The convolutions in the Nigerian linguistics ecology as Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019) noted, have made the use of the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) a more universal and inconclusive language, inevitable in both formal and informal domains. The NPE is widely used in certain states where minority languages abound, and no particular language is deemed the major language. State creation, however, gave rise to the status of the various local minority languages in such states (Kperogi, 2014). Such states where NPE is viewed as a language in its own right by constant usage and growth include the South-South geo-political states of Edo, Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and Cross River, and to a lesser extent, Akwa Ibom. A pidgin is a communication system that develops among people who do not share a common language. Pidgins are auxiliary languages that can be characterized as either restricted or extended. An extended Pidgin is one that, it may not become a Mother Tongue (MT/L1) but proves virtually important in a multilingual nation like Nigeria, where Pidgin is used beyond the original limited functions (Kperogi, 2014).

Conclusion

This article provided the history, status and functions of the English language in Nigeria and Delta state, which is my major concern. It showed that in Delta State, as a multi ethnic state, the English language has a major role to play in formal settings and the pidgin English in informal settings, and presently in formal setting in order to aid communication in a state where there are different ethnic groups. It showed the growth of the pidgin English from being a debased form or informal variety of the English language to one that has grown to be taught as a subject in tertiary institutions. The article highlighted the different activities that brought about the birth and growth of the English language in Delta State. They are from the era of the slave trade, evangelization and pre and post-colonial eras, respectively.

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