



The Use of Nigerian Pidgin English in Print Advertising: Deviation from Standard Orthography and Effectiveness

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Abstract—This paper presents the content analysis of randomly selected print advertising copies partially written in Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), and used for the promotion of services and products made in Nigeria. It is equally based on a focus group discussion with 15 literate and semi literate users (readers) of these copies. It attempts to show how the writing of advertising copy is complex due to the prevalence of different and personalized spelling systems in the representation of NPE words. It illustrates how most Nigerian advertising copywriters artfully deviate from the standard orthography developed by the Naija Language Akademi (NLA) in preference to relatively individualized/personalized orthographies. The paper equally shows how effective the use of NPE may be in catching the attention of readers. It argues that while the use of pidgin may be relatively unnoticed in cases where its use is not dominant in the body of the advertising copy, the language has the potential of triggering the curiosity and interest of the consumer to know more about the product. It equally has the potential of creating fun, and increasing the entertaining qualities of the print advert. All these characteristics may motivate consumers to go for the product or service on promotion.

Keywords— Nigerian Pidgin English, Advertising Copy Writing, Print Advertisement, Naija Language Akademi

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Pidgin English (Henceforth NPE, NP or *Naija*) has so permeated the various social strata of the Nigerian society that it is today viewed as one of the most convenient forms of communication in reaching heterogeneous target audiences. The language is extensively employed in the dissemination of information aimed at mass communication (mass mobilization/orientation). A plausible evidence of this assertion is the fact that, NPE is used in radio and television programs, as well as in drama presentation (films), entertainment and advertising of all sorts. As Mokwenye rightly puts it, the language has virtually attracted

“unofficial recognition from private enterprises and business outfits” that amply use it for the purpose of advertising and promotion of their respective business/products through both electronic and print media [1, p.122]. It has even been observed that the language (NPE) is used more than vernacular tongues and Standard English language (SE) in audio-visual advertising in Nigeria [2-9].

The use of NPE in advertising messaging – like in other types of (mass) communication contexts – is aimed, at practical, functional and pragmatic goals. Balogun notes that the language has a “rhythmic value” that gives it “a poetic form” and makes it very appropriate for persuasive discourses – of which advertising is one [2, p. 95]. In most political and advertising campaigns for instance, NPE is instrumental in reaching and catching the attention of a vast number of people. The language is, in this respect, viewed as having the potential of facilitating the dissemination of advertising messages to both literate and semi/non literate consumers [3-4]. Balogun further notes that NPE tends to capture people’s audience better than other languages. This is so as “it is down to earth and as such, many people are motivated and carried along” [2, p.95]. Furthermore, NPE is a very rich language which remarkably enjoys variability and can be used by virtually all categories of people, elite, illiterate, educated or uneducated to communicate.

Despite the fact that it enjoys the patronage of most people in Nigeria, NPE is a predominantly oral language as it does not enjoy a generally acceptable orthography [2; 7-8; 10]. The language orthography seems to vary with respect to individual users. In effect, the language has a multiform spelling system which somehow renders its use – in written communication in general and print advertising in particular – very complex. The recent development by the *Naija Language Akademi* (NLA) of a standard orthography to be used in writing NPE seems to have instead worsened the situation [2; 5; 11]. In view of this complex situation, advertising copywriters tend to ignore the so called standard orthography and largely borrow the English spelling system in their composition of the advertising messages. They use writing approaches (orthographies) that are principally based on modern European languages and personalized linguistic creativity techniques. These advertising copywriters equally resort to inter-sentential and tag (NPE/SE) code switching/mixing as a dominant and practical paradigm

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to reach as many audiences as possible. This paper aims at illustrating this apparent rejection or ignorance (by advertising copywriters) of the NPE conventional orthography. The paper equally seeks to evaluate the degree of effectiveness of the use of English based pidgins in print advertising.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper hinges on two theories examining the effects of language in advertising communication namely the informational approach and the symbolic meaning approach. The informational approach is centered on how easily readers or potential consumers may comprehend and respond to information given in a specific language. In line with this approach, an advertising message delivered in English language may potentially be ineffective if target consumers or audiences from an ethnic subculture could not understand or interpret the message. Similarly, the use of English language in a advertising campaign aimed at illiterate or semi literate consumers who principally understand NPE or a minority/marginalized (indigenous) language may be ineffective [3, 12]. Oluwole corroborates this assertion when he contends that:

For an advertisement to be effective, it has to consider first its audience; the educational, social, political and religious background. It has to consider the subject that will appeal to the audience and what should be avoided [...] In addition, it should avoid alienating audiences by choosing subject which proves to be too high for the consumer level of satisfaction or comprehension and this is very important, especially in Nigeria and most undeveloped countries where the level of illiteracy is still very high [4, p.28].

The informational theory is somehow relevant to Nigeria. As Dada insightfully contends, “English has become a second language in Nigeria, while Nigerian Pidgin English, with probably the largest number of speakers, has also emerged as a result of contact of English with the indigenous languages” [3]. This makes it is “only logical for advertisers to use more than one language – and especially English and NPE – in their commercial endeavor”. In a given speech community, language use for advertising communication is determined by a plethora of factors including speech styles or register, topic, person (role –relations) and locale / place. This means that the choice of either Pidgin English or Standard English by an advertiser is a strategy to reach the target audience. The informational approach therefore stresses that advertising message be constructed in the language target consumers understand best.

The symbolic meaning approach, on the other hand, is associated with the status and value of languages in a given community of consumers. It states that measures of linguistic attitude and linguistic usage by consumers or audiences

represent some of the cardinal determinants of advertising communication/campaign [13-14]. In line with this Dada notes that “language choice especially in a multilingual community like Nigeria follows certain patterns and typology based on demographic, situational and attitudinal variants controlled by socio-cultural norms of communicative appropriateness” [3]. According to the symbolic meaning approach, a linguistic code may have a symbolic meaning which can provide marketers with deeper insight into the value of employing the language in any marketing/advertising strategy.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Language Use in Advertising*

As typical instances of planned communication, advertising messages are generally aimed at producing specific forms of reaction, behavior or attitudes from the heterogeneous receivers of the message (target consumers). As Jefkins insightfully notes, advertising “presents the most persuasive possible selling message to the right prospects for the products or services at its lowest possible cost” [15]. Advertising can therefore be considered as an art/act of persuasion and subtle manipulation – as it entails mobilizing a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic resources to entice consumers to go for a particular product or service. In this persuasion art, language plays a very important function. Indeed, language usage is an extremely powerful instrument in advertising message construction and it has even been observed that advertising language is very unique in terms of usage [4, p.27; 16]. As Dada rightly posits, “with the way advertisers use language to promise consumers heaven on earth, it seems non-brilliant writings have no place in advertising” [3]. The ardent desire to catch consumers’ attention and persuade them to go for the product or service on promotion often motivates copywriters to resort to linguistic creativity and other strategic techniques. Dada points to such linguistic creativity when he notes advertising copywriters’ tendency of dominantly using linguistic phenomena such as weasel words.

Advertisers often use special words or phrases called weasel words. These expressions are often misleading. A weasel word is a modifier that practically negates the claim that follows it. The expression ‘weasel word’ is aptly coined after the egg eating habits of weasels. A weasel will suck out the inside of an egg, leaving it with an infant appearance to the casual observer. Examples of these words are: helps, works, best, good, and goodness [3].

The novelty, freshness and creativeness of advertising language are all justified by the advertisers’ desire to attract people’s attention, win their trust and ultimately sway their thinking. In line with this, Etuck notes that the language of advertising “carries novelty and impression. This language is

more frequently associated with the power of oratory than with commerce. Being constrained by time, money and the fear of losing the attention of his audiences (potential consumer), the advertiser is compelled to explore brevity, conciseness and linguistic dexterity" [17, p. 75]. This creates a breeding ground for the use of 'speakable' words. 'Speakable' words are catchy and short linguistic expressions that vividly translate a series of pictures and images which the advertiser wants the product on promotion to be associated with. Osundare in Oluwole corroborates this view when he opines that: "one of the strategies of advertising is not only to pack maximum information into the fewest possible words, but also to evoke the maximum possible response with the few words" [4].

The advertising copy is also very notable for its information and explanatory values. The vocabulary and other socio-cultural elements of the advertising message – such as intercultural accommodation features – must be right and aimed at influencing the consumer [13]. In effect, the advertising language must systematically and subtly be translated into the language of the consumer [4]. Indeed, when designing advertising messages, most experienced copywriters rely on the ethnography of communication which, according to Finch, is "the study of language in relation to the social and cultural variables which influence communication" [18, p.222]. Ethnography of communication examines the rules, or conventions, about how language should be used in social interaction within a particular society. It focuses, for instance, on linguistic and paralinguistic approaches – ways of using sentences to show deference, to entice or motivate someone to do something, to display verbal skills among others. Ethnography of communication is also concerned with social as well as referential meaning and with language as part of communicative conduct and social action [3; 13; 18].

It is equally important to note that the use of language in advertising copywriting varies with respect to the medium of transmission. Though speech characteristics are central in conceiving advertising messages irrespective of type of media, language use in audio-visual advertisement is somehow different from language usage in print advertising. In print adverts for instance, the formulation of headlines plays an important function in the construction of the message. In some cases, the headline even plays an all powerful part in catching the attention of the reader and making him or her to want to see and learn more about the product. Meanwhile, on television, there are no headlines but an opening shot, The advertiser here, depends so heavily on the picture alone and an intelligent construction of the opening scene could be based on making the viewer say 'what's that? Tell me more'.

B. Use of NPE in Written Communication

As a marginalized language, NPE has – for decades – been practiced basically at the oral level. It has mainly existed as a form of oral communication, manifested in such contexts as church sermons, music performances, buying and selling in

markets, private oral-aura communications among others. According to Ugot and Jibril, the language used to be strictly confined to oral communication within certain cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic communities and it is only in recent times that a lot of observable efforts and initiatives aimed at promoting its use in written communication could be noted [6; 10]. Ugot succinctly concedes that:

The NP used to be restricted to oral communication in some ethnically heterogeneous communities in informal settings among the elite or for advertisement and propaganda on radio and television. Its use has now spread to literature and other written materials such as gossip articles in newspaper and soft sell magazines [10, p.27].

In a somehow different line of argument, Esizimotor traces the earliest recorded attempt to write N.P. as far back as late 1700s. He enumerates three major trends in the orthographic conventions so far employed in writing the language namely the early orthographies (EOs), the press orthographies (POs) and the linguistic orthographies (LOs) [11, p.7-8]. The early orthographies of the NP (mainly used by early merchants and explorers) actually made no considerable efforts to standardize the writing system of the language. They simply sought to present the language in the way it was spoken at that time. As such, the written form of the language appeared as a kind of broken or contact English. As Esizimotor insightfully contends, "these early attempts at writing the language showed that Naijá was still very much a contact language. And the spelling system adopted was some sort of contact orthography. The orthography employed large-scale English spellings or what some critics consider as etymological spelling system. Even so, local content words in Naijá were surprisingly also spelled in the non-phonemic spelling system of English" [11]. The Press orthography – which is perceptible in the writings of journalists and novelists who are bent on indigenizing or giving a Nigerian/local color to their works – on the other hand, does not so much differ from the early orthography as it similarly attempts to present NPE as spoken "without being too phonemic in spelling". In addition to this, the press orthography gives room to an indefinable number of spelling styles, including non-phonemic spelling styles of English. The linguistic orthographies (developed by linguists and the Naija Languaj Akademi) appear phonemic in surface but really complex. They have relatively less chances of being popular with users who, for long, have familiarized themselves with the press orthographies.

Current initiatives aimed at using the NPE in writing are visibly characterized by borrowing principally from the English language and other modern European languages spelling systems (orthographies). Literatures such as early translations of the Bible in NPE and novels and poetry in pidgin attest to this fact. A myriad of recent works have provided illustration of NPE use in writing. These literary works as well as scholarly publications have equally shown

detailed descriptive and analytic treatment of the language syntax, morphology and phonology [2; 19]. Apostle Okwonkon has, for instance, come up with an acclaimed translation of the Bible according to the conventional orthography of the Nigerian Pidgin English [20]. Despite all these commendable initiatives, reliance on standard NPE orthography is still problematic to many linguists and users of the language. Balogun points to this fact, when he insightfully contends that:

There has been a wide array of criticism against Nigerian Pidgin based on the orthography, that is, the representation of Nigerian Pidgin into writing. This relates to the best way to write it and what to be the base language: is it European languages or the indigenous languages? Some scholars [...] have suggested a new modern orthography, which will be based on the principle of modern orthography. Against this suggestion, Nigerian Pidgin is alleged for not having a generally acceptable model. For example, the tense-agreement as we have it in English is absent [...] Also, there is no gender distinction [...] Furthermore, the spelling system is not uniform. This of course, may be traced to the recent development of a standard orthography [2, p.96].

In effect, the development by the NLA of a standard orthography for NPE has instead contributed in rendering the writing of the language very complex. The standard orthography seems somehow complicated as it integrates features that may demand serious linguistic training to an average writer or user of the language. The complex nature of standard NPE orthography can be demonstrated with the four following NPE sentences drawn from Activie's article titled "Cultural Influences as Inputs of Development of Naija Language":

- a) *omonigho tek shem chop winch*, meaning "omonigho (ingested witchcraft willy-nilly [for being too shy to turn down the offer in order not to offend the giver]) agreed to terms and conditions that were not agreeable with her.
- b) *Nwokem, im sabi se mi a no gri komot hand fo di sek of se dis wan na chacha*, meaning "My man, he knew I couldn't be persuaded to withdraw for, as you are aware, this particular one is brand new"
- c) *Luk mai prond, mek yu fut mor epot por diz viznes, d'Allah* meaning "Look my friend, you need to put more effort into this business, I beg of you".
- d) *Shebi a don kuku tok am befo befo se dis fud no gud fo mai befe at ol'* meaning "I did mention before now that this sort of meal is not agreeable with my system of digestion" [5].

Words such as 'tek', 'shem', (in [a]), 'se', 'mi', 'fo', 'di', 'sek', 'dis wan', (in [b]), 'mai', 'yu' (in [c]) and 'befo' 'ol' among others are likely to be spelt according to a more anglicized orthography, respectively as 'take', 'shame', 'see', 'for', 'the/de', 'sake', 'this one', 'my', 'you', 'before' and 'all'. Also, the existence of letters with accents or sub-dots such as in 'komot' (remove) and 'fo' (for) contributes in complicating the orthography. NPE standard orthography demands a high degree of literacy from potential users of the language. This has caused various and arbitrary orthographies (which are predominantly English based) to prevail and be preferred in the use of the language in written communications, notably in the construction and indigenization of print advertising messages.

Though the Naija Languag Akademi (NLA) has developed a reference guide including the language alphabet, a comprehensive dictionary and a standard guide for its orthography, the NPE is still, predominantly used as "a language without rules" [21]. As a skeptical linguist cited by Ibukun rightfully puts it " [NPE] na like pikin wey no get papa, wey no get mama [NPE is like a child without father or mother (our translation)]" [22]. NLA's efforts in the defense and promotion of the NPE are palpable. Nevertheless, the institution still has the titanic task of introducing these guides to schools and of facilitating the vulgarization of this (new) standard orthography, the Linguist Orthography.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on two methods of data collection namely qualitative content analysis and focus group discussion. The qualitative content analysis involves a corpus of fifteen randomly selected advertising copies (that are in NPE or NPE/SE bilingual). It is important to note here that NPE use in print advertising is not so common and so the researcher had to depend on advertising copies he could lay hand on. A total of fifteen copies – for the advertisement of cosmetics, cable operator service and religious programs – generated by Nigerian advertisers were considered. The content analysis aimed at showing variations in the different orthographies employed by advertising copywriters in print adverts. It illustrated such variation with help of relevant advertising copies from the lot.

The paper equally hinges on a focus group discussion with a number of 15 literate and semi-literate individuals. The study considered 8 literate and 7 semi-literate discussants. The researcher's choice of literature and semi-literate was guided by the fact that in theory one needs a degree of education to be able to read a language. Users of the NPE that are totally illiterate may therefore not be able to effectively read written message in NPE. The 15 selected focus group discussants were asked to analyze the six of the 15 advertising copies and respond to the messages contained in the copies. In addition to this, the discussants were asked to illicit their attitudes towards the use of NPE in the selected advertising copies. The focus

group discussion was centered on the three following questions:

- Does the use of Nigerian Pidgin English affect your comprehension of the packaging (when you see a product package) or print advertising copy?
- Does the use of Nigerian Pidgin English affect your perception of the product or service being advertised?
- Does the use of Nigerian Pidgin English motivate you to go for the product or service being advertised?

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A. *The Use of NPE in Advertising Copy Writing in Nigeria*

As earlier mentioned, the different NPE orthographies mobilized by advertising copy writers are somehow concurrent. Though scholars such as Ativie opine that the birth of the Naija Languej Akẹdẹmi (NLA) – a school which seeks to develop and to defend the NPE– and the development by this institution of a standard orthography has somehow led the language to have a fixed convention of orthography; and enable it to relatively enjoy standardization, advertising copy writers mostly continue to use traditional unconventional orthographies, basically press orthography (PO) [5, p.3]. It appears as if, in order to write the NPE, many copy writers take English language as the departure point, “break a few rules of English grammar and insert some NP words at the appropriate positions” [23]. It is, equally noticeable that, quite often, many advertising copy writers that employ NPE, extensively use anglicized spellings. These anglicized spelling are “characterized by the writing of most Nigeria Pidgin words exactly as in English, altering only a few words” [24, p.290]. This particular trend is illustrated in the following advertising copies:

- i. The Banqueters Ministry
Festival of Fire
Theme: **Oh God na like this we go dey?**
[...]
- ii. **Akpos don come again o!**
Catch the Chronicles of Akpos on your phone
Call 31078 and just listen
The guy wahala too much.
Call now. N30/min.
- iii. Hypo
Go wipe o!
Active ingredients:
Sodium Hypochlorite 3.5% w/n
Whitens, removes stains, kills germs
- iv. **DIGI Levelz don land**
No carry last
To subscribe call [...]
For just N 6900, 1 month Gotv plus subscription

The sections being emphasized in the various extracts show various styles in uses of the *naija* in written. As can be noticed, the phrases and sentences highlighted are principally formulated according to an anglicized orthography of the NPE. For instance, for the sake of the standard NPE orthography, “Oh God na this we go dey?” featuring in example 1 would be written “O God, na laik dis wi go dé?”. Similarly, “catch the chronicle of Akpos on your phone. The guy wahala too much” meaning “get a copy of Akpos’ chronicle sent to your phone. The man’s stories are so interesting”, could be written thus: “katch de kronikl of Akpos fọ yọ fon”. The promise made in example 3 concerning Hypo (a brand of bleach) reading “go wipe o!” (and meaning Hypo bleach is going to wipe away all stains from your cloth) may be “corrected” thus: “go waip o!”. And finally, “DIGI levelz don land. No carry last” featuring in example 4 could be rewritten as “DIGI levul don land. No kari las”. The extract means “DIGI (a cable television service) has been greatly upgraded. Do not be the last person to subscribe for the service”. These four examples illustrates Egbokhare’s and Elugbe’s claim that, in their attempt to write pidgin English, most writers of the NPE tend to mainly use anglicized spellings and alter few words [23-24].

A remarkable feature in the four advertising copies used in this section – as may be noticed in numerous other advertising copies – is the use of NPE/SE code switching/mixing. This is in line with Etuk’s observation that, though NPE has been ‘accultured’ to carry the Nigerian experience, the language still poses problem to some of its users – especially advertising copywriters – resulting in frequent use of code-mixing, code-switching and interferences in advertising initiatives aimed at heterogeneous communities of consumers [17]. In effect, most often, the English language is used to give additional information on the product or service on promotion. This often includes information such as the proprieties/characteristics of the product, contact addresses of manufacturers, use mode and the like. While the part of the message delivered in pidgin may be viewed as communication in a playful and less serious note, the section in SE stands as communication on a very serious note.

The use of NPE and code-switching is therefore more symbolic than informative. As a symbolic feature in print advertising, code-switching – from a dominant language (English) to a minority or marginalized language (Nigerian Pidgin) – in print advertising messages is visibly done in view of the perceived favorable attitude (from users of NPE) towards the use of the language. Been informed by this positive attitude, a number of scholars and linguists have strongly militated for the expansion of the language and its elevation to a far more better status in the Nigerian linguistic ecology [2; 24-25]. If it be true that Nigerians (especially the consumers) feel positively disposed to the progressive visibility and usability of the NPE, consumer-based industries and advertising agencies may be motivated to respond to this feeling by incorporating the NPE into communication

strategies targeting major consumer groups – who, of course, are users and sympathizers of the language [14, p.2-3; 26, p.13].

The symbolic value of an SE/NPE bilingual advertising strategy can be exploited by elements of the commercial sphere (advertisers) wishing to target a particular segment of consumers who feel favorable about the use of NPE and who value the support of these advertisers for the promotion and utilization of NPE as a living and rich language. The use of NPE in advertising copy could therefore be viewed as a symbolic object aimed at responding to particular Nigerians' (the pro NPE community) need for social identity and self-definition.

B. Focus Group Discussants' Attitudes Towards the Use of NPE

The study sought to illicit audiences' attitude towards the use of pidgin English in advertising copy writing and measure the degree of effectiveness of this language use. The discussants started by discussing on the extent to which the use of Nigerian Pidgin English affects their comprehension of the packaging or advertising copy. They also discussed on how such a use of NPE affects their perception of the product or service being advertised and finally on the extent to which NPE use could motivate them to go for the product or service been advertised. The responses did not very much vary from groups of discussants (from discussants who were literate to those who were semi-literate). This section provides a summary of the focus discussion review.

Audiences' attitudes are generally positive as the use of the NPE successfully attracts and catches their attention to the point of motivating them to want to re-read the advertising copy. In effect, the first response a reader has to a message coined in pidgin is that of surprise and puzzle. As has been noted above, advertising copy readers are used to spoken NPE and so, they very much expect the language to be used in advertising messages disseminated through audio-visual media such as radio and television. The use of NPE in print advertisement is generally viewed by them as puzzling and amazing. This very often triggers readers' curiosity and interest to know more about the product on promotion. Audiences (especially the semi-literate ones) also interpret the use of the NPE as a deliberate, less elitist and holistic communication effort. This is so as, when it comes to language use and communication, NPE is considered the common denominator for both the literate and the semi-literate. Written Pidgin English is to many readers a type of simplified English which, to majority of semi-literate audiences, is more decodable than SE. The focus group discussants generally considered the anglicized NPE orthographies employed in the advertising messages comprehensible.

Furthermore, the use of Pidgin English increases the entertaining qualities of the advertising message as such its use has potential of creating fun while facilitating the communication of information on the product on promotion. This is very important as one of the most vital principles in advertising messaging is entertainment. According to this principle, an advert should have the capacity to use limited strategic features to entertain the audience as entertainment may contribute to enticing the consumers to go for the product.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show how the writing of advertising copy is complex due to the prevalence of different spelling systems in the representation of NPE words. It illustrated how most advertising copy writers deviate from the standard orthography developed by the Naija Languej Akademi (NLA) in preference to relatively individualized/personalized orthographies. The paper equally showed how effective the use of NPE may be in catching the attention of readers. It argued that while the use of pidgin may be relatively unnoticed in cases where it is not dominantly used and the advertising copy, the language has potentials of triggering the curiosity and interest of the consumer to know more about the product. It equally has the potentials of creating fun, and increasing the entertaining qualities of the advert. All these characteristics may motivate the consumer to go for the product or service on promotion.

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