

# Peerglossia: A Sociolinguistic Study of Its Effects on the English Language Proficiency of Nigerian Senior Secondary School Students in Kano State, Nigeria

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**Abstract** - *This paper is on the sociolinguistic study of peerglossia –language of the peer group- and its effects on the English Language proficiency of the Senior Secondary School students (SSS) in Nigeria. The Nigerian Government and stakeholders in education are worried about the low level of English Language proficiency of the SSS students. The author is therefore interested in finding out the causes of the appalling decline in the performance of SSS students in English Language at the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE). The author therefore conducted a research on the relationship between sociolinguistic variables and students' performance in English Language in some randomly selected secondary schools in Kano State in Northern Nigeria. The assumption is that peerglossia has an inhibitory effect on the language use of SSS students. From the written tests and questionnaire administered to the students, it was found that parents' socio-economic and political status and education background influenced students' choice of peer group whose language use has deleterious effects on students' language proficiency. The paper then suggests some ways through which students' proficiency in English Language can be improved.*

**Keyword:** *Peerglossia, peer- group, sociolinguistic variables, proficiency, inhibitory effects, language use, Nigerian English, ethnolinguistics*

## INTRODUCTION

For quite a long time now, there has been a public outcry about the general downward trend in the standard of education in Nigeria. This is more decried in the English language results of students in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) or the West African School Certificate (WASC) and the General Certificate Examination (GCE). There is

therefore a general widespread and orchestrated concern, and perhaps disquietude, among educationists, policy makers, examining bodies, parents and employers of labour over the apparent decline in the level of English Language proficiency of our Secondary School graduates. Adeyanju (1974) for instance, lamented that at the end of the secondary school education, the Nigerian student has spent twelve years learning English Language but the results have been disappointing. Many people have tried to posit reasons for this disheartening failure of students in their Language examinations. People have been most concerned about English language because it is the bedrock of communication, both in itself and for other subjects offered in other academic disciplines.

Nadama (1983) in Odumuh (1984) submits that poor English is responsible for the falling standard of education in Nigeria. Garba (1979) posits that the rapidly falling standard of English in Nigeria has been caused by such diverse factors as the British Language policy in the colonial period, apathy of the youth to the English language, the substrata interference problems, teachers' incompetence, attachment to Traditional Grammar, the use of Direct method (Straight for English) in learning English and many more. This paper posits that peerglossic (peer-group) language, as a social agent, has an inhibitory effect on the SSS students' language use, and on their performance in English Examinations. It was discovered, for instance, that social class is one of the possible sources of differences in language development, as manifested in the contrast between the poor working class and the middle class children, with its general practical implications. This paper posits that the failure of many poor children to succeed in school is all too obvious; one pervasive explanation being that the language development of these children is impaired by poverty and that this

impairment in turn hampers language learning. It is upon this social class influence, especially the peer-group sub-culture, that this paper is based.

### **Peerglossia**

Our position in this paper is that stratification system within the society is one of the fundamental causes of the decline in the language proficiency of the SSS students. This paper therefore sets out to find out the possible influence that peer-group language, otherwise described as peerglossia, may exercise over the formal language form that is taught them at school. There is the need to establish the fundamental causes of differences in the language use of children from different social groups, and separate sociological factors inhibiting effective language acquisition in learners from the psychological factors, in the hope that modalities for preventing wastage of educational and academic potentials would be arrived at.

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that Learners of English Language at the SSS level in Nigeria come from diverse socio-economic homes and therefore have different ethno-linguistic backgrounds and influences; the socio-economic differences have made a demarcation between the working class and the middle class children in their language use; the socio-economic status of each child dictates his choice of peers and hence the peerglossic language he uses; learners from the working class homes have low ambition and this affects their attitude to the learning of English Language; the low-motivation of the working class children affects adversely their language acquisition and language use, and this affects their performance; parents' occupation influences the quality of their children's education; and peer-group sub-culture influences learners' attitude to the learning of standard English.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Language is one of the most general acts of men whose learning can easily be taken for granted. The Language which each child learns is a unique inheritance. This, in essence, implies that language learning and language use are far more complex than every other mechanical thing man can learn to do, and more peculiar to individuals in terms of use under varied conditions. Little wonders then that learners ever have difficulties in language use, and teachers constantly have to face the arduous task of seeking solutions to the complexity of failures in language

examinations. Every language has its own system of organization, that is its own grammar. All systems operate concurrently in any given communicative exchange (Olaoye, 2007).

It is the totality of all these peculiarities that the learners have to learn in order to perfect their language use. The teacher has to be sure that his learners learn the correct form of the grammar and its application. Unfortunately, and sadly enough, it is this formal and correct form that a greater percentage of learners, most especially those with poor linguistic and socio-economic background, always find herculean to grasp and apply at school and in their examinations. Language educators should however be wary of conservatism in Language learning, especially in enforcing the learners to use what ignorant teachers call 'correct' use of old forms. This could be detrimental to learners' academic growth. Teachers often have a profound feeling of nostalgia for the things that used to be and for the things that never really were, and very often have distaste for the things that are comparatively new. Teacher should realize that varieties of Language exist; each variety serves different interest groups and different social functions (Ige, 2002).

### **Varieties of Nigerian English**

According to Banjo (1979) one of the most fascinating things about language is that it manifests variation that is induced by space, time and situation. This implies that language is not static. It changes Irrespective of its status, in its home base; and when it comes in contact with any other language. There are bound to be deviations from the norm, and many varieties of it will emerge. There is therefore no limit to the structural diversity of languages. English is no exception; it has undergone a number of changes. These changes create in people, even the native speakers of the language, various attitudes. Its use, either as a second language or foreign language, creates different attitudes (positive or negative) towards the varieties (Olaoye 2013).

New varieties of English, which have emerged from the contact situations, have been variously described as 'indigenous', 'nativized' or 'local' varieties of English. But as each variety is fast established, its uniqueness and sociolinguistic legitimacy is deviant to what could be regarded as the Received Pronunciation (RP) or 'National' Classroom English taught by the teacher. In Nigeria, for instance, there have been attempts advertently or inadvertently to naturalize, colonize or nativize

English language, a kind of retaliatory tendency. However, this is deviant to what obtains in academic English studied in our schools. In pursuance of its naturalization, Lawal (2006) says that English language is no longer foreign in Nigeria, for we have effectively appropriated it. Odumuh (1981) also believes that Nigerians have successfully colonized English as a second language.

The use of English language in Nigeria has developed unique features due to series of interference factors. In this as in other countries, internal norms of phonology, lexis, syntax and speech acts are used for speech events, and the parent 'norms' of the language are not necessarily accepted as legitimate for use. Thus the socio-cultural cum economic and the accidental birth place of an individual dictate the types of deviations that are exemplified in individual's language use. Apart from the localization of English through restructured, non-standard use, researches show that Nigerians find solace in typifying English language such as 'Nigerian English'. This sometimes ranges from something very near Standard English to the patois of the market place (Grieve, 1964; Spencer, 1971). Such identification ranges from the 'Educated Nigerian English' (Odumuh 1981), Standard Nigerian English (Adesanoye, 1973), 'Nigerian Pidgin' to 'Bad English' (Ubahakwe, 1999). All these point to the fact that the spoken and possibly the written forms of English language in Nigeria, both by adult and kids, educated elites and even school learners, come in various shades, deviant to what the native speakers would accept as the standard Received Pronunciation used for academic purposes.

### **Sociolinguistic Concepts**

In as much as the arguments abound in linguistic and anthropological circles, that educators should not by any means describe any language as 'superior', 'inferior' or 'sub-standard', there is also the need to differentiate language variations and their use among learners from their application of public or restricted peer group codes. It is the duty of language educators to point the direction of language use to learners when they result to institutionalizing 'Bad English' in their formal academic work. (Ubahakwe, 1999).

There are varieties of English as well as sub-varieties. There are acrolectal, basilectal, mesolectal, sociolectal and idiolectal subvarieties. There is also the 'standard dialect' of English. This is the dialect of the educated speech community to which the student is trying to conform by virtue of being a learner. It is in

this educated dialect that the student has to express ideas that are important and new to him if he wishes to conform or be accepted as a member of the educated speech community. But peer-group sub-culture and many speech variables, determined by different situations, dictate peer-group language use. For instance, speech variables in Hymes' (1972) acronym "SPEAKING" determine the varieties of English used by peer groups.

Banjo (1969) identifies four main types of spoken 'Nigerian English' which this paper considers typical of four different social classes and which typify peer-group language use. The first is said to be spoken by those whose knowledge of the language is very imperfect. This class of people uses English as a foreign language, and their variety differs from pidgin in a way. It is neither intelligible nor socially acceptable. In fact, Adesanoye (1973) contends that the users of this variety are semi-literate whose educational level is not really much higher than the very elementary.

There are learners and peer-groups from this class of people. Banjo's second variety of spoken 'Nigerian English' is said to be spoken by about seventy - five percent (75%) of Nigerians. He argues that the social acceptability of this variety is high while its international intelligibility is very low. This variety has phonological negative transfer from the speakers' mother tongue. The SSS students belong to this category of speakers. The third variety is spoken by less than ten percent (10%) of the country's population. It is related to the Standard British English both syntactically and semantically. It has phonological Received Pronunciation deep structure, but with Nigerian surface structure. This variety coincides with what Odumuh (1981), Munzali (1982, 1985) characterizes as 'Educated Nigerian English'. The fourth variety is spoken by a relatively few Nigerians who are native speakers whether by birth or by training in Europe, or even by European upbringing. Though maximally intelligible to the international community, this variety lacks social acceptability, as it is often being derided by Nigerians as being too Europeanized. There are peer groups from these four classes of Nigerian English speakers and each peer group speaks different inner-circle dialect.

Nigerianizing English is the crux of the matter - a practice which is both dangerous and counter productive. Philosophically it is politically expedient but academically undesirable, as students will have to

sit for nationally and internationally recognized examinations, which are set in Standard English.

Anyway, academic text books are written in the Standard English variety but the language of peer group is informal, non-academic, too colloquial, casual and very ribald in style. For instance, Nigerian Secondary School students (SSS) use the following expressions in their communicative act:

- 'Sorry' - for I beg your pardon.
- 'Should in case' -for incase.
- 'I am coming' - for excuseme or I'll be back in a moment.
- 'Big man' - for a wealthy man or an influential person'.
- 'Escort' - for see off or come with or accompany.
- 'Latrine' - for lavatory or toilet or convenience.
- 'That guy/fellow' for that man/gentleman.

### **Nigerian English Written Form**

Adesanoye (1973) identifies three varieties of written Nigerian English. Though unique in themselves, these varieties have certain common core deviations which make them essentially Nigerian in character. The first variety is exhibited by products of Primary and Modern Three Schools. The most common deviant features in this variety are poor lexis and syntax emanating from mother tongue interference, and too long sentences lacking in accurate punctuation. Other features include poor orthographic representations. The second variety is exhibited by secondary school students, Basic studies students and Colleges of Education students. This is the most widespread of the three varieties. The third variety is exhibited by University graduates. The feature of this variety can compare favorably with the educated written English variety.

## **METHODS**

### **Sampling procedure**

Six secondary schools were sampled within Kano municipal of Kano State. The Schools are:

1. St. Louis Girls' Secondary School, Bompai, Kano.
2. Government Secondary School, Gwamaja, Kano.
3. Women Teachers' College, Goron-Dutse, Kano.
4. Aminu Kano Commercial College, Kano.
5. Rumfa College, Kano.
6. Federal Government College, Kano.

Although these schools were randomly selected, some stratified sampling techniques were also used. The stratification was done along the line of

Federal/State, Christian/ Muslim, Boys/ Girls, Teachers' College/Commercial School, Rural/Urban dichotomy.

### **Data Elicitation Techniques**

Two sets of questionnaire, one for the English language tutors and one for the SSS students were distributed. Questionnaire items focused on students' socio-economic background, parents' occupation and educational background, students' co-curricular activities, peer-groups' language use in the classroom and at home, students' oral and written English, students' hobbies and clubs. Students were given some essay topics to write on. These essays were grouped together according to the students' social class categorization, and were read and analyzed.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Sociolinguistic Analysis**

From the teachers' and students' responses coupled with the essays written by the SS Students, it was discovered that social class is one of the sources of differences in language development as manifested in the contrast between poor and middle-class children's language use. The spoken and written form of the language of peer-group show that different social class has different phonological, morphological and syntactic systems. Peer-group sub-culture under which both working class and middle class children operate form a melting pot. For those from the working class homes their phonological system is deviant to that of standard academic English of the classroom type. These children exhibited imperfect mastery of the vowel and consonant systems. Their pronunciation is adversely affected by their Mother Tongue. They are also found with the error of hyper-correction in their oral English. Morphologically and syntactically it was found that students' parents' occupation and socio-economic background influence students' choice of words and sentence construction. Their words and sentences exemplify their sub-culture of violence, brigandry, anti-establishment posture, their inanity, militant posture and crude and rude heterosexual manner.

For instance, these words and expressions were elicited from their conversation and essays:

“fork you, shit men, I'll dagger you, don't care at all, you gonna do it, your ass, pierce him well, rob her, I'll carate him, that guy, are you leaking? Groovy party, no pain me, night guard,

I care less, don't mind that fork shit principal,  
he no serious, flabby chest, slippers breast, mad  
dog, goro mouth, chizzle her mouth, naked her,  
balcon the girl''.

From the essays of the students who come from educated homes or the middle-class homes these words and expressions were gathered:

''doxology, penal, moneybag, satellite dish,  
military uniform, my father is a cop, my  
ambition is to become a medical doctor, our  
radio is fine, what is your future plan?, my  
success, salad gifts, air ticket, car park, lecturer,  
nice drinks, night party, kind principal, nice  
classmates, electronics, salary, fuel crisis,  
bookworm, poultryfarm, contract awards''.

When three or two groups of children meet in their various peer-groups, they are forced to conform to their group norms. This in effect means making a bonfire of their good, Standard English and decent language behaviour in an attempt to show a sense of belonging. Peer-glossia therefore affects students' pronunciation; some students speak with foreign and outlandish accent, rude tone and stress, and criminal-modulated voice. Morphologically, their words are archaic, colloquial, ribald, prosaic, pornographic, uncouth and monotonous. Syntactically, their conversation is full of ungrammatical sentences, incomplete sentences or sentence fragments, ellipsis, hybridized loan words and expressions, odd or ragged code-mixing and code-switching.

The failure of many poor children to succeed in English examinations is obvious; one pervasive explanation being that the language development of these children is impaired by poverty and that this impairment in turn hampers learning. Our finding is that deprived environment retards children's speech and this inferior speech leads to deficient thought, all of which lead to school failure. The sub-cultural differences among peer-group caused by different social class influences are responsible for the various inner-circle, dialectal forms which do not conform to the standard, acceptable, official variety of English used for public examinations.

It was found that the lower the social strata, the greater is the resistance to formal education and learning. This resistance is expressed in many different ways and levels: gross indiscipline in language use, non-acceptance of their teachers' values and corrections in the class, their failure to develop and feel the need for an extensive and acceptable vocabulary, preference for a descriptive

rather than an analytical cognitive process and students' dogmatic use of esoteric vocabulary which makes non-sense of standard English.

The middle-class child is socialized within a formally well articulated structure. The same cannot be said of children from the lower class. Children from upper and middle classes use the elaborate code while those from the working or lower class use the restricted code. The peculiar modes of pronunciation, characteristic turns of phrases: slangy forms of speech, occupational terminologies of all sorts, are the many symbols of the manifold ways in which society arranges itself, and are of crucial importance for the understanding of the development of individuals and social attitudes. This view is in support of Olaoye (2007) that the lower socio-economic groups have a different language structure from that of the higher groups. They (the lower) speak various non-standard dialects.

### **Psycholinguistic Analysis**

The child from the middle class grows up in an environment which is extensively controlled; the space, time and social relationships are explicitly regulated within and outside the family group. In contrast, the working - class family structure is less formally organized in relation to the development of the child. The fact that the working- class child attaches significance to a different aspect of language from that required by the learning situation is responsible for his resistance to extensions of vocabulary, the manipulation of words and the construction of ordered sentences; he is used to peer-group expressive symbolism. In view of this, the child's attempt to substitute a different use of language and to change the order of communication creates critical problems for the working - class child, as it is an attempt to change his basic system of perception, fundamentally, the very means by which he has been socialized.

Each learner acquires what his language is from his home and the immediate environment, especially his peers. The structure and forms of such language is brought into the school second - language learning situation which is quite different in form, structure and style. At every attempt to make new structures in the second language, the child introduces or incorporates the peer group language forms and structure into it. This is then condemned outright as unfit for target language. What this amounts to is that the language of the working-class child in the classroom situation and even under examinations is poor compared to that of

the middle-class child. The former speaks 'public language' while the latter speaks 'formal language'. The structure of the language inhibits verbal expression and so the learning attendant on such expressions. The speaker of public language attempting to refine his language to suit the formal, elitist classroom situation sees himself as guilty because it is tantamount to rejecting the language of his peers. Here comes the confusion which brings about social break down. The typical form of breakdown will tend to be delinquent, especially where the existing social structure no longer provides effective, realizable expectations. There will therefore be a considerable resistance to formal education and a high degree of failure, unless other special conditions are present.

### **DISCUSSION**

The gang or peer group is a typical and very important unit for the child and the adolescent. The social value orientation of the learners is collective rather than individualistic, particularistic rather than universalistic, diffuserather than specific, ascriptive rather than achieving, affective rather than neutral. It was noted that student' resistance - the unconscious resistance - to change in the case of public language users is very high, for there is every probability that attempts to modify their linguistic orientation will be perceived as attempts to change the means by which they have been socialized. Such language may bring to the speaker a feeling of isolation and bewilderment, defenselessness and frustration, whilst the structure of the teaching situation may be regarded as an imposition, very punitive and persecutory. Students' normal value system and orientation will no longer be appropriate, and this raises, very considerably, their level of anxiety. This has Inhibitory effect on learning.

Our finding is that no greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their language or dialect. The language of the learners as used among his peers, psychologically unites the speaker to his kin, sociologically integrates him into his local tradition and his peer-group sub-culture, and so the risk of alienation from his root abounds, especially if he is enforced to abandon language for the more academic, accepted formal language of the school. It is this phenomenon brought about by Peer glossia which grows out of social stratification that is seen in this paper as the very likely cause of the mass failure of learners in English language examinations in Nigerian secondary Schools.

### **SUMMARY**

Students come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Parents' socio-economic status determines or influences students' educational carrier. The students' socio-economic background dictates or influences their choice of friends and peer-group, and their peer-groups resist Standard English. It was also found that students cannot totally divorce their peer group language from the classroom language situation. Co-curricular activities serve to enhance students' language use. Disparity exists, to a great extent, between the language performance of children from the middle-class homes and children from the low income, working-class homes in phonology, morphology and syntax. Other factors militating against the learning of English language are teachers' incompetence, inadequate teaching materials, government's lip service to education in general. Learners' peer group sub-culture inhibits effective teaching and learning of Standard English in Nigerian Secondary Schools, because peer-groups institutionalize bad English in their academic work. Students from working-class homes are not given sufficient motivation regarding the use of Standard English. Students from poor socio-economic background have low ambition and hence are not great achievers in language learning.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Teachers of English Language should recognize peer group language, and make use of it in the teaching of varieties of Nigerian English, especially English for specific purposes (ESP). The unacceptable aspects of peer group language should be brought out and criticized. Teachers should teach Standard English in the classroom and let the learners know the variety of English which is acceptable in public examinations. Teachers should teach different occupational register used by various social classes. They should avoid overgeneralization of expectation from learners. Students' spoken and written errors in English should not be mocked or corrected in ridiculous manner. Parents should discourage the learning of language behaviour that is inimical to their educational advancement. Government should equip secondary schools with adequate language teaching aids. Schools should encourage the formation of subject-based associations like clubs where Standard English is used in communication. Schools should supervise co-curricular activities which students engage in so as to monitor their language use.

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