



Nigerian English in Two Plays: Solanke's *Etiti All Eyes on You* and Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket*

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Abstract

*The use of indigenous languages to communicate dramatic works of art has been a topic of academic discussion for many years. Mainly because of the need, as suggested by various scholars (Obi Wali 1963, Oyin Ogumba, and Bode Osanyin 1971), to create a dramatic form that embodies a transcultural identity in language, form, and content. By adopting the 'act of identity' and 'communication accommodation' theories, this paper highlights discussions that have driven the use of Pidgin in some literary plays in West Africa, particularly in the southern part of Nigeria. The paper focuses on *The Lottery Ticket* and *Etiti: All Eyes on You* by Ahmed Yerima and Jimi Solanke, respectively, to identify social issues such as poverty, oppression, and illiteracy that are prevalent in African society and shared among speakers of Pidgin English. The paper analyses the different levels of accessibility in two Nigerian plays. One is written in elitist indigenised Nigerian English, and the other in Nigerian Pidgin English. The paper finds that, despite discussing similar subjects, the Pidginized plays will likely attract a larger audience and facilitate better comprehension in the performance space. Therefore, using Pidgin in writing and performing literary plays is crucial for ensuring cross-cultural hybridity within the region and empowering Pidgin speakers of Nigerian origin in the diaspora. In conclusion, the paper submits that encouraging Pidgin plays can promote rapid development and orientation by conveying Indigenous cultural heritage to Nigerian audiences.*

Keywords: Nigerian Pidgin, Nigerian English, Communication, Nigerian plays

Introduction

Structured Practitioners Note:

Sundry scholars, such as Obi Wali (1963), Dapo Adelugba (1978), Sam Ukala (1995), Isaiah Ilo (2015, 2013, 2006), and others have proposed the need to deploy the indigenised Nigerian language in writing Nigerian literary plays.

This trend is recaptured in some plays that have been written since the first generation of literary playwrights in Nigeria, beginning with the popular works of Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Tess Onwueme, and the likes only a few of Ola Rotimi's plays display a hint of Indigenised English similar to day-to-day colloquial English of daily conversation.

This study refers explicitly to select plays written in indigenised English and Pidgin, and is specific in its identification of a peculiar language bias used by this playwright as distinct from regular language use in drama to discuss social issues common to the Nigerian masses and readers in the diaspora.

This article will enlighten readers on the broad spectrum of the language variants deployed by the playwrights in the plays under study and underscore how easily accessible the texts are in terms of understanding and adaptation in meaning because of the ease in the choice of language variants deployed by the playwrights.

Finding a language that can effectively express the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of sub-Saharan Africa's multilingual and multicultural people is challenging. The need for a language that can resonate with this diverse population, who share a common colonial, economic, and political history, is a discussion that must be addressed. Many scholars have advocated adopting an indigenous yet humanised language, arguing that a common language can bridge cultural divides, promote social-political unity, and foster advancement across cultures. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o states, "Language, any language, has a dual character; it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi 13). Immaculate Kizza argues that revitalising our traditional indigenous languages is "our ticket to cultural preservation, development, and complete independence from colonialism and neo-colonialism." He further emphasises that "African languages were marginalised during the colonial period, and to some extent, were considered inferior and degraded" (Kizza 95) by the colonialists.

The choice of a language for African literature raises the question of whether the colonial languages (such as Portuguese, English, French, etc.) can authentically express the socio-cultural and linguistic realities of the African continent (Yeibo 202). The quest for independence and establishing an official language in many sub-Saharan African countries led to the widespread use of Queen's English, which had a detrimental impact on the original multilingual societies. The strict adherence to Queen's English yielded little benefits, as many speakers needed help to grasp the language, leading to the emergence of Pidgin as an alternative. This further complicated the linguistic situation on the ground. As a result, "the prevalence and lingua franca status of Nigerian Pidgin, which has almost replaced the native languages as the primary language of the Nigerian masses from diverse linguistic backgrounds, has exacerbated the linguistic situation" (Osoba and Alebiosu 113).

Wa Thiong'o, in the closing remarks in the foreword of the essay "*Decolonising the Mind*", laments that:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe plundered art treasures from Africa to adorn their homes and museums; in the twentieth century, Europe was appropriating the treasures of the mind to enrich their languages and culture. Africa needs to reclaim its economy, politics, culture, languages, and patriotic writers (12).

Preserving indigenous languages is essential for reclaiming identity and cultural space across Africa. However, the increasing intercultural communication in the region calls for a language bridging cultural, tribal, and political divides. When discussing the need for an aesthetic principle for writing plays for the Nigerian audience, Sam Ukala suggests that Nigerian playwrights should write in a language that most Nigerians can speak, as the country has multiple languages (Ukala 279). It is recommended that playwrights should abandon the English language and write in the people's language. The language of 'the people' is the linguistic choices individuals make at any given moment, which can be considered a linguistic result of the linguistic situation in the larger society. Speakers can interpret these languages' meanings (Quarcoo 86). Pidgin English is arguably the most prevalent language in the sub-Saharan multilingual society. While English is considered the language of the elites, Pidgin is seen as the language of the street and is commonly used by those in the lower strata of society (Uzaji 2). Pidgin is recognized as a common communicating language found in almost every part of the world. The combination of languages from various origins best defines it.

Linguistic scholars have attempted various definitions of the pidgin language, but there is yet to be a conclusive understanding of what a Pidgin is and how it originated. According to Marcin, the word "pidgin" and its meaning have yet to be precisely defined to avoid any terminological ambiguity and misunderstanding. UNESCO defines Pidgin as a language that arises from the contact between people of different languages, usually formed from mixing languages (Marcin 28). Foley's definition of pidgin encompasses a broader characteristic than that of UNESCO. Foley affirms that pidgin is a contact language, an amalgam of linguistic elements of two or more languages that arise from the social and economic transactions between at least two groups that speak different languages. According to Foley, the process results from the restriction and simplification of one of the languages of the groups, which is usually in a socially superior position (Marcin 30).

West African Pidgin may have originated when the Portuguese contacted the region. Their first contact spanned the era of the slave trade. There is a claim that "this language was used for about three centuries - from the 15th to the 18th century around the coast of West Africa (Marcin 30). It is prominent for literary scholars to convey their creative ingenuity in a language that best communicates their message to the reading and viewing public, especially in prose, poetry, and drama. Pidgin English in drama as an alternative to English, Portuguese, French, and other indigenous foreign languages in this region may be based on the "Socio-dramatic transition of language" proposed by Abdul

Rasheed, Adeoye. According to Adeoye, the socio-dramatic transition of language is the flexibility of language use and movement dynamism in dramatic construction through a playwright's drama characters (Adeoye 101). This leads to the concept of linguistic culture, which views language beyond spoken words in any dramatic text but instead sees language in the concept of perception, imagery, and ideas that the language of a text suggests or invokes in the minds of the speakers/audience. Linguistic culture affirms the underlying thoughts, feelings, and values about the culture projected into language. In other words, language is a system into which humans are born (Kearney 7). Language is crucial to communicating drama to a larger audience. Thus, it behoves a dramatist to explore, at every level of dramatic creation, a language that can communicate while being accessible simultaneously.

Dramatic Language and the 'Act of Identity Theory.'

The 'Act of Identity Theory' (AIT) is a sociolinguistic legacy developed by Le Page and some of his students and colleagues in 1974. (Richford 254). The study made a significant contribution to the use of language in understanding the identity of individuals, groups, and societies. The theory emphasizes the varying essences present in language during communication and how language use can define an individual's or group's socio-cultural identity during a speech act. The study employed various research methods, including using the Pidgin twin sister Creole. In dramatic terms, characters are distinguished by factors that set them apart in a play. A key element in character differentiation is how language use and speech patterns shape their identity. Ukala, discussing the Nigerian audience, notes that using dramatic language is not sufficient:

It also needs to be identified to be comprehensible. Merely understanding the language of translated Sophocles or Shaw does not allow the Nigerian audience to identify with their plays since it does not reflect that audience's indigenous speech pattern (Ukala 280).

The notion that a language is going to aid the ability of a listener/audience to assimilate more gives a better sense of identity. When this happens, the language boasts the confidence level of repose in dramatic work. Identity can be seen "in postmodernist multiculturalism and its opposition to all forms of domination on issues such as race, gender, class, or language" (Dasylva 392). In this form of multiculturalism, an individual is not restricted by any barrier in attuning to a culture representing what one believes and feels. When this happens, language can become a medium of cultural identity. As such, as a matter of priority, people will naturally deflect the language that promotes their culture and self. Another theory deployed in this work is the communication Accommodation Theory, as discussed below.

Communication Accommodation Theory in Drama

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), developed over four decades ago, is a socio-psychological and language-based theory used for

several humanities studies. The theory investigates the links between language, context, and identity (Gallois et al. 123). The theory is a multifunctional theory that conceptualises communication in both subjective and objective terms. It focuses on intergroup and interpersonal features and... can integrate dimensions of cultural variability (Gallois et al. 126). Understanding the nuances and intrinsic meaning of sub-Saharan Pidgin depends on the side of the language divide one finds oneself. While it is easy to understand and speak Pidgin across the sub-Saharan region, the local dialect that informs the type of Pidgin dialect the individual speaks differs from those spoken by others from different cultural divides. Thus, fluency and immediate accommodation of the language only sometimes align, as observed with English and French.

***The Lottery Ticket* by Ahmed Yerima**

Ahmed Yerima's play uses satire to narrate the story of every impoverished African fighting for survival in a society that must determine her fate. The hallmark of such a society is the self-will to exist barely or the misfortune to perish in the harsh reality of society and its economic abnormalities. Hence, the characters in Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket* are the product of post-colonial, socioeconomic, and political degradation. Surviving in an existentialist space is a choice they can make for themselves. Therefore, existence becomes a game of gambling. The only hope for survival in this winner-takes-all society Yerima created hinges on winning a lone lottery ticket. Describing Yerima's choice of characters in *The Lottery Ticket*, Adeyemi (2007) observes that:

The characters in the universe of *The Lottery Ticket* are ordinary men and women who are not contented with their economic conditions and, therefore, are determined to get richer through the shortcut offered by a lottery. Although there can be only one winner amongst thousands of people who have bought tickets, each character believes they will win. (Adeyemi 189)

Is it possible for everyone to win a single lottery ticket? Will the win solve the monumental problems awaiting it? And who is qualified to win? Will Baba Tailor, who is diagnosed with every form of imaginable disease, win? The following dialogue reveals the nature of Baba Tailor's sickness:

Landlord: Wetin Doctor says dey do yourself.

Baba Tailor: Diabatis, atiritis, hanpertenstion, high blood pressure, and heart. problem (Yerima 16).

His doctor's diagnosis, which was reeled out to Baba Tailor, is as strange as shocking. What could be the cause of all these illnesses if Baba Tailor is neither a politician nor a moneybag businessman? He has the sickness of a rich man, yet his only visible problem is poverty. A shocked Landlord and Mama Lizi beg to differ from Baba Tailor's Doctor in the following dialogue:

Landlord: Watin pain me self na say, na bigman sickness
you come
carry for the body.

Mama Lizi: E surprised me too. People say na as man big
rish, he dey
fall, but Baba Tailor just fall yakata for bigman sickness well,
well.(Yerima 17)

Mortified by Landlord and Mama Lizi's response to his diagnosed health condition, Baba Tailor responds thus:

Baba Tailor: Why na de talk like this now?" (Yerima 17).

Explaining it to Baba Tailor's ignorant understanding, the Landlord decides to educate the audience by explaining to them in Pidgin the meaning of Baba Tailor's long list of illnesses:

Landlord: See hen, diabetes na wen big man don chop many
sweet things. Atiritis na wen big man sit down dey drive
moto de chase women. Which moto do you get past Pasenja
for Molue buses? Herpatension na when you wori for
account wey de for London. You wey be say na ajo you dey
do. High blood na wen life sweet big man and everything
wey he dey do na highlife, e chop leg of chicken, e chop
woman leg, wash am with Odeku. (Yerima 17)

Baba Tailor's illness is a metaphor that describes what the poor claim are the typical illnesses a rich man must have because of their wealth and lifestyle. As enumerated by the landlord above, he tries to rationalise Pigin as the language of the masses. He communicates using serious and happenstances that connote the everyday experience of the masses. By illustrating the meaning of Atiritis (Arthritis) through an average Molue transit experience, (A regular transit bus used in Lagos to commute passengers from one point to another), he invites the audience into a known space. It is a space familiar to them and from which they can see themselves and ask questions. He even asked Baba Tailor if he had another vehicle other than the standard passenger buses they take together. This is apt to explain the disease's meaning to the audience because he makes us believe that arthritis cannot affect the average poverty-stricken everyday masses who do not sit and drive luxury vehicles. With this dialogue, Yerima deployed Pigin as a cultural language to illustrate and emphasise the poor's socio-cultural and economic identity in their own space. In this dialogue, Yerima empowers the characters in his play to interpret life from their own peripheral, living and interpreting life from their standpoint and infusing their journey and challenges to substitute the everyday life of the rich. The characters want to be liberated from the shackles of poverty and step into the life of the rich political "Bigma" and embrace his filth and diseases. They all scramble for one opportunity; the possibility of winning a lone ticket for these desperate people

sparks an attitude of greed to the extent that winning is becoming an obsession with fantasising about spending the money they possibly would not win. "Landlord hopes to spend the money on acquiring a new wife – Lizi, Mama Lizi wants to buy a shop and rent a two-room apartment at Ajegunle, and Danger's dream is to buy a bus" (Adeyemi 189). Describing the extent to which Yerima employs creative license in his use of Pidgin English in this work, Adeyemi submits further that Yerima sufficiently conveyed the African vernacular experience in general and the accent of speakers reflected the socio-economic aspect of life as it pertains to the speaker in particular. Moreover, no fixed rules and the absence of syntax usually made it possible to find expression for anything easily amidst a minimal English vocabulary" (Adeyemi 191).

Etiti... All Eyes on You by Jimi Solanke.

This play discusses socio-political issues resulting from a clash of interests and dichotomy in power polity. This power is inherent in the youths and the older leaders in a typical sub-Saharan society. While the elderly spiritual/cultural custodians (depicting political positions) of the land are feeding fat from the sacrifices and gifts– from taxpayers' money –made to the god, Etiti, the youths are jobless and hopeless, yet slaving to appease a god that has been mystified by the powers there be. The quest by the youth to seek justice directly from the gods themselves is met with a brick wall, as the elders undo themselves in a bid to shield the absolute truth of their corrupt and sharp practices hidden behind the altar of religion. As the elders who are supposed to be the custodians of culture gather to worship Etiti, the youths come to seek justice but are met with stiff resistance as follows:

Youth Leader: Lisa, Baraogo! We mean no harm. We have just chosen this occasion to express our feelings concerning a lot of sufferings and problems confronting us as youths in this community....

Lisa: I believe you all sat down and planned to come here and desecrate the shrine of Etiti because only the initiate comes to this close.

Female Leader: Desecrate? Not really, but our problems overtook our thoughts and respects. We want to talk to Etiti.

Lisa: Then you decided that today, the day Etiti, the spirit of our ancestors, will accept its sacrifice, must be the day to come and tell him your grievances and problems? (Solanke 18)

The unexpected happens when Etiti, the god of the land, appears to address and mend the fences that had been broken by mistrust, laziness, and disrespect for

cultural heritage on the part of the youth: nepotism, greed, embezzlement, corruption, and oppression on the part of the leaders. A lot of anger and bitterness is expressed in this play to condemn a form of oppression that had become the norm of the day. As Etitu appears, he brings with him peace by suggesting to members of the divide the best way to coexist and become responsible in each of their spaces. He urges us to be more responsive to one another and our community by obeying rules and fundamental cultural principles. At the same time, he reprimands the leaders for their lack of patriotism and reminds them of their place as leaders and custodians of the culture itself.

Pidgin English in Yerima's *The Lottery Ticket*

Pidgin English across sub-Saharan Africa primarily influences the speaker's first language. The first language influence also determines the cultural nuance a speaker interjects or assimilates when interacting with others during conversations. Using the CAT, an analysis of the levels of convergence and over-accommodation about how language is accepted by its speaker highlights the possibility of integrating the dimensions of cultural variability.

This paper considers this necessary to encourage cross-connections in African Drama that support a better understanding of sub-Sahara Pidgin's nuances and intrinsic meaning. In the case of applying AIT, the speakers, on the other hand, can identify with the language and constantly accept its use since language "can be a means of solidarity, resistance, and identity within a culture or social group" (Lanehart 322). There is a constant interplay between how the language user interrogates and his understanding of the variant of the language he is listening to or contributing to. This is because there is a shared knowledge of the disparity in the level of influence a particular pidgin variant can have. Lanehart cites Le Page (1986) in furtherance of his AIT argument by confirming that:

People create their linguistic systems (and we all have more than one) to resemble those of the groups they wish to identify occasionally. Both the groups and their linguistic attributes exist solely in the mind of each individual. When we talk, we project the universe as we see it onto others as ... our images, expressed in the appropriate language. We invite others by these acts to share our universe. This does not necessarily mean that we accommodate our behaviour to resemble that of our audience, though we may do so. Instead, we behave in the way that - unconsciously or consciously - we think is appropriate to the group we wish to identify with. (Lanehart 323)

In "The Lottery Ticket," Yerima uses the general Pidgin English spoken in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This particular dialect of Pidgin is considered the purest form spoken in Nigeria. It incorporates common words from the native dialects of the people in the region. As a result, the language used in *The Lottery*

Ticket is more refined and makes for better reading. In a conversation about Danger's mother and the wife of the Local Government Charman that area boys harassed, the Landlord explained that he is related to the wife of the Chairman, who hails from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. He illustrates that:

Landlord: I say na my sister, her mama na Isoko like my
Mama and her Papa na from Kwale. (Yerima 24)

This statement gives credence to the variant of pidgin English Yerima used in this play. He delves into the linguistic partner of the Deltan Pigin that sometimes interlocks the native dialect with Pidgin. For instance, Mama Lizi and Lizi occasionally included words like 'Yeye' or 'Mumu' in their sentences. These words are derived directly from the Urobo language and, over time, have been integrated into Pidgin to mean Useless and foolish.

On the other hand, "Etití..." is not written in Pidgin English but in a variant of Queen's English used by prominent Nigerian playwrights such as Femi Osofisan, Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi, Sam Ukala, and Ahmed Yerima in his other plays. Dapo Adelugha in 1978 coined the term "Yorubanglish" to describe this variety of English, which he portrays as an attempt to capture the flavour, tones, rhythms, emotions, and intellectual content of Yoruba language and thought in an adventurous form of English. The language used by Jimi Solanke in this play is also a form of "Yorubanglish," which communicates the emotions and thoughts of the people using the flavour of the native Yoruba language. "Etití..." is rich in traditional folk songs and chants that resonate with compelling cultural and moral values. Although the songs are in Yoruba, they enhance the play's subject matter by infusing a sense of traditional African performance ensemble and flavour. The uniqueness of African literature lies in the bilingual background of the writers, who see their works in a second language influenced by the resources of their mother tongue. It is noted that place names and other aspects of language can be used to construct and express identity, and because people can feel attached to both a place and a place name, they probably think they "have a right" to the name. This also applies to linguistic variation, identified and owned by the original speaker who claims the right to such variation (Pederson 179).

The Pidgin language, as used in some dramatic works in sub-Saharan Africa, is the most suitable language for discussing issues of poverty, underdevelopment, greed, survival, and social malaise such as oppression and illiteracy. These issues are recurring themes in the three plays under study and a shared experience among the people living in the area under study. Pidgin English is an auxiliary contact language for communication between characters from different backgrounds (Adeyemi 191). The difference in their backgrounds in terms of ethnicity and mother tongue was not a barrier to showing courage and hope together and believing, like the characters in "The Lottery Ticket," that even wishful thinking, like winning a lottery, is possible and attainable, while the youths in "Etití..." break political and spiritual barriers to attain justice from the god Etiti.

Summary and Conclusion

The theme of self-colonialism is prominent in Nigeria and the broader sub-Saharan region, as depicted in the plays being studied. A common thread in these plays is the protagonists facing significant challenges and clinging to hope for a better future. There is a persistent theme of hope-seeking redemption in all three plays. While Yerima portrays the lottery ticket as a ticket to success, Solanke introduces supernatural elements in *The Lottery Ticket*, this represents the intensification of hope as a means of survival. Characters like 'Mama Lizi,' 'Baba Tailor,' 'Danger,' 'Landlord,' and others in "The Lottery Ticket," as well as the Youth Leader, Female Leader, the Youths, and Woman/Aiyedun in "Etiti" are all victims of the same socio-economic and political predicament. Unfortunately, this plight is not confined to the Southern part of Nigeria, where these plays are set. Still, it reflects the broader challenges faced by speakers of Pidgin English in Nigeria. Characters like Landlord and Mama Lizi in *The Lottery Ticket* and 'Iya Agba,' 'Luwo,' and 'Lisa' in "Etiti" symbolise the respected underdogs with some level of influence that oppress the poorer of the poor in their category and space of poverty.

In the future, the language used in Etiti and other dramatic works written in its style may be familiar to elitist and indigenous audiences. However, its appeal may not be as widespread as the Pidgin English spoken by a more diverse population. Pidgin English speakers readily switch to this language wherever they hear it, feeling a natural responsibility to accept and understand its usage and meanings. Therefore, the level of accommodation and acceptance of plays in Pidgin English evokes a sense of ownership and ensures identity, mainly when used as a tool for cultural re-engineering and integration among Nigerians.

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