

A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents descriptions and analyses of noun clauses attested in my data of Nigerian Pidgin English as spoken in the southern Nigerian city of Port Harcourt. It will be shown that in Nigerian Pidgin noun clauses may optionally begin with the noun clause introducer 'se'. This is the only morphological marking device, which distinguishes noun clauses from other clauses. Additionally, noun clauses in the language occur in one of two syntactic positions following the verb of their super-ordinate clause: the object position or the adverbial position. Since there is little or no evidence in Nigerian Pidgin to make a case for the existence of categories like the 'copular', 'adjective', or 'intransitive verb'. Hence, the standpoint taken in this paper is that a noun clause that does not occupy the adverbial position can be said to be the syntactic object of the verb of the clause to which it is subordinate.

Keywords: noun clauses, copular, adjective, intransitive verb

1. INTRODUCTION

As the title suggests, the main aim of this paper is to attempt to present a basic description and analytic treatment of noun clauses in Nigerian Pidgin, using data collected between June and September 2003 in Port Harcourt. The data sample on which the descriptions and analyses are based are composed of transcribed recordings of speech from 61 speakers. They were selected on the basis of age, sex, ethno-linguistic background, daily Pidgin use patterns and level of education. This was done with a view to representing a cross-section of the Nigerian Pidgin-speaking community in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria. The population of Port Harcourt is a little over two million. To obtain this sample, tape-recordings of conversations, story-telling sessions and other casual interactions were made in several working-class homes/compounds; schools; bars; market stalls; and at the many bus and taxi ranks scattered all over the city.

The explanations to all the abbreviations and symbols used herein are found in the appendix. Before moving on to describe and analyse the noun clauses attested in the data, I would like to consider the *history and evolution of Nigerian Pidgin*.

2. THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN

Here, I look at Nigerian Pidgin and its speakers and attempt to answer the question of whether the language is a Pidgin or Creole. I also explore the genesis and development of Nigerian Pidgin.

2.1 NIGERIAN PIDGIN AND ITS SPEAKERS

Nigerian Pidgin is said to be one in a line of English-lexifier Pidgins and Creoles spoken along the West African coast and in African Diaspora communities spread along the Atlantic basin. Among these related Pidgin varieties, the Cameroonian Pidgin is closer in form to Nigerian Pidgin than are, for instance, Sierra Leonean and Jamaican Krio. However, these Pidgins and Creoles have in common a significant number of semantic, grammatical and phonological features and structures.¹

It is estimated that there are over 75 million people who speak Nigerian Pidgin as a second language, and the number of first language speakers is put roughly at between 3 and 5 million. These numbers are increasing all the time because the Nigerian Pidgin is very popular with younger members of the polity, who constitute a greater number of the population of Nigeria, which is estimated to be about 133 million. Nigerian Pidgin is the most widely spoken language in the country. It is different from the other 400 or so Nigerian languages because members of every regional, ethno-linguistic and religious group in the country speak it. It is further distinguished from the Nigerian Standard English (NSE) due to the fact that it is spoken by members of every socio-economic group, while only those Nigerians with many years of formal education can claim to speak Standard English with any proficiency. Knowledge of Nigerian Pidgin is fast becoming indispensable for everyday practical communication and the understanding of issues affecting the Nigerian.

It is rather disappointing to note that despite the overwhelming evidence within Nigeria that Nigerian Pidgin is in all respects the most logical choice for a national language, it is accorded little or no recognition by Nigeria's language policy planners and administrators. Official attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin remain largely negative, sustaining flawed notions passed on from the colonial era that Nigerian Pidgin is some type of 'broken English'.

2.2 PIDGIN OR CREOLE?

Based on my observations in Port Harcourt, I tend to agree with Faraclas (1996: 3) that the name Nigerian 'Pidgin' is to some extent misleading, since the

¹ See Faraclas, 1996; Kulick, 1997; Sebba, 1997; Holm, 2000.

Nigerian Pidgin-speaking community includes people who speak the language as a pidginised speech form, as a creolised speech form and/or as a decreolised speech form. For example, for an Ikwerre market woman whose use of Nigerian Pidgin is restricted to business transactions, the language is a Pidgin in the true sense of the word. For her children who speak Nigerian Pidgin to their Kalabari schoolmates, the language is depidginising or creolising. For the Igbo man who speaks Nigerian Pidgin with his Efik wife, and especially for his children, who speak Nigerian Pidgin with their parents and each other, the language is not Pidgin at all, but a Creole. For the child from an elite Port Harcourt family who grows up speaking Nigerian Pidgin, but who hears Nigerian Standard English at home, on formal occasions, at school and on the radio and television, Nigerian Pidgin is in all probability a decreolised speech form.

For the sake of convenience, Nigerian Pidgin can be divided into three sets of social lects. Firstly, acrolectal (decreolised) varieties which show significant influence from Nigerian Standard English. Secondly, basilectal (pidginised or repidginised) varieties which show significant influences from other Nigerian languages, and thirdly, mesolectal (creolised) varieties which typify the speech of those who use Nigerian Pidgin in most of their daily interactions or who have learned Nigerian Pidgin as a first language. It is common in practice for most speakers to change their lect or variety of Nigerian Pidgin in accordance with social context. For example, a bank clerk may use a basilectal variety in the market, a mesolectal variety with colleagues at work and an acrolectal variety with his line manager. However, this study adopts mesolectal varieties of Nigerian Pidgin for all descriptions, analyses and examples, unless otherwise stated (see also Faraclas, 1996).

2.3 GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIAN PIDGIN

Nigeria's expansive and vigorous population and age-long tradition of ethnic and linguistic diversity and forbearance led to the emergence of a highly mercantile society with large urban centres centuries before the landing of Portuguese merchants who traded pepper and slaves from the Nigerian coastal area. The Portuguese first arrived in Benin (city) at the end of the 15th century. From the mid 16th century, the British took over as major trading partners. With the abolition of the slave trade at the beginning of the 19th century, British colonial interests shifted to agricultural production for exportation to Europe. However, even before these contacts with Europeans, city life, intermarriage, trading and travel brought Nigerians who speak different languages into close contact with one another for thousands of years. Thus, bilingualism and multilingualism have always been practiced in most parts of Nigeria. For these reasons, it is very likely, according to Faraclas (1996), that a pidginised form of Nigerian languages existed and was in use many centuries before the arrival of the first Europeans. Support for this claim is found in northern Nigeria around

the Lake Chad basin where non-native speakers of Hausa use a pidginised form of Hausa in the markets while a pidginised variety of Igbo is spoken at present in some Niger Delta markets in the south.²

As has been highlighted above, Nigerian Pidgin may well have developed from one or several such pidginised Nigerian languages that were spoken along the coast before the arrival of the Europeans. However, owing to the importance of the European trade and the reluctance of the Europeans to learn other languages, European words might have been substituted for Nigerian words for ease of communication. Since the Portuguese arrived first, a few Portuguese-derived words like *sàbi* ‘know’ and *pikîn* ‘child’ would have been initially adopted, but as the British colonial dominance over Nigeria increased, more and more English words would have been integrated into the language. With British colonial administration came European education through missionaries, many of whom were Krio speakers from Sierra Leone – mostly ex-slaves or descendants of ‘repatriated’ slaves from the Caribbean.

With Faraclas (1996), I would argue that it is impossible to say for certain whether Nigerian Pidgin developed from marketplace contacts between European traders and the various ethnic groups along the coast or from the influence of missionaries from Sierra Leone. We can assume, however, that both of these factors played some part, but it is important that scholars exercise some care not to over-emphasise the role of either the traders or the missionaries in the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin. In the frantic search for origins, creolists typically ignore the fact that, at every stage of its history, Nigerian Pidgin has been used primarily as a means of communication among Nigerians rather than between Nigerians and traders, missionaries or other foreigners. From the evidence available it is difficult if not impossible to state clearly any cogent synopsis for the origin and evolution of the Nigerian Pidgin that does not assign a significant role to impact from the linguistic models with which southern Nigerians have always been the most familiar: the structures that typify the languages of southern Nigeria.

Having given a brief outline of the Nigerian Pidgin-speaking community and the origin and evolution of the language, I now move on to present descriptions and analyses of its noun clauses.

3. NOUN CLAUSES

Following Faraclas (1996), I argue here that in Nigerian Pidgin grammar all noun clauses may optionally begin with the noun clause introducer *se*. This is the only morphological marking device, which distinguishes noun clauses from other clauses. Noun clauses occur in one of two syntactic positions following the verb of their superordinate clause: the object position or the adverbial position.

² For more details on the origin of Pidgins and Creoles see Mafeni, 1971; Shnukal & Marchese, 1983; Goodman, 1985; Winford, 1997; Holm, 1989, 2000.

A noun clause may also follow an adverbial clause introducer, in which case it can be taken to be part of a larger adverbial clause. Equally, there is little or no evidence in Nigerian Pidgin to suggest the existence of categories like the ‘copular’, ‘adjective’, or ‘intransitive verb’, hence a noun clause that does not occupy the adverbial position can be said to be the syntactic object of the verb of the clause to which it is subordinate. Therefore, noun clauses in Nigerian Pidgin may be divided into two categories: object noun clauses and adverbial noun clauses:

1. *Object noun clause*

A tink [se dem kuk rais].
1sP thinkF [ncI 6sP cookF rice]
‘I think they cooked rice.’

2. *Adverbial noun clause*

Im tel mi se ‘chop rais’ [se hongri du mi finish].
3sP tellF 1oP ncI eatF rice [ncI hungry doF 1oP +C]
‘(S)he told me, ‘eat the rice’ because I was hungry.’

3. *Noun clause as part of an adverbial clause*

A go kuk stu [if [se yu bai mit]].
1sP –R cook stew [avcI [ncI 2sP –R meat]]
‘I will cook stew if you buy meat.’

3.1 SEMANTIC REPRESENTATION OF NOUN CLAUSES

There is little if any evidence in Nigerian Pidgin as regards the morphosyntactic criteria to differentiate one type of object noun clause from another, however the semantics of object noun clauses varies significantly, depending on the semantics of the main clause verbs for which they function as objects.

3.1.1 Noun Clauses as Objects of Verbs of Cognition

Verbs of cognition or perception in most instances take noun clause objects:

4. Yu sàbi mi.
2sP knowF 1oP
'You know me.'

5. Yu sàbi [se A de Port Harcourt]
2sP knowF [ncI 1sP cvF Port Harcourt]
'You know that I am in Port Harcourt.'

6. Yu si mi
2sP seeF 1oP
'You saw me.'

7. Yu si [se A de Port Harcourt]
2sP seeF [ncI 1sP cvF Port Harcourt]
'You see that I am in Port Harcourt.'

3.1.2 Noun Clauses as Objects of Verbs of Speaking and Showing

The structures used for direct and indirect speech are very similar, both are composed minimally of a verb of reporting such as *tok* 'talk' or *tel* 'tell' followed by a noun clause. The major distinguishing feature between direct and indirect speech in Nigerian Pidgin is that while the pronominal person categories of the original utterance are maintained in direct speech constructions, they are converted to those appropriate to the reporting situation in the case of indirect speech:

8. Dem tok [se 'Wi de Port Harcourt'].
6sP talkF [ncI 2sP cvF Port Harcourt]
'They said, "We are in Port Harcourt."'

9. Dem tok [se dem de Port Harcourt]
6sP talkF [ncI 6sP cvF Port Harcourt]
'They said that they are in Port Harcourt.'

3.1.3 Noun Clauses as Objects of Verbs of Interrogation

Broadly, the most commonly utilised structure for both direct and indirect reporting of questions are made up of a verb of interrogation such as *aks* 'ask' accompanied by a noun clause object. As in the case of direct and indirect speech the pronominal persons of the original utterance are preserved in questions reported directly, while they are changed to match the reporting situation in the case of indirect questions. In addition, an oblique hearer and/or object may be inserted between the verb of interrogation and the noun clause object. However, reported questions are set apart from reported speech in that the verb of interrogation may not be followed by a valence-increasing verb. These statements become clearer when we take a look at the examples below:

10. *Direct yes – no questions*

- James aks mi [se 'Yu go maket ?']
James askF 1oP [ncI 2sP goF market Qù]
'James asked me, "Did you go {to the} market?"'

11. *Indirect yes – no questions*

- Ema aks mi [se weda a go maket].
Ema askF 1oP [ncI whether 1sP goF market]
'Ema asked me whether I went {to the} market.'

12. *Direct question-word questions*

- Sam aks mi [se 'Weting dem giv yu for maket?']
Sam askF 1oP [ncI what? 6sP giveF 2sP p market]
'Sam asked me, "What did they give you at the market?"'

13. *Indirect question-word questions*

Ema aks mi [se dem giv mi weting for maket].
Ema askF 1oP [ncI 6sP giveF 1oP what? p market]
'Ema asked me what they gave me at the market.'

Below are further examples of noun clause objects of verbs of interrogation:

14. Chime aks mi [se hu giv mi weting for wer?].
Chime askF 1oP [ncI who? giveF 1oP what? p where?]
'Chime asked me who gave me what where.'

15. Ada aks mi [se weting dem give mi].
Ada askF 1oP [ncI what? 6sP giveF 1oP]
'Ada asked me what they gave me.'

16. Nsirim aks mi [se dem aks yu [(se) weting]].
Nsirim askF 1oP [ncI 6sP askF 2oP [(ncI) what?]]
'Nsirim asked me what they asked you (about).'

On rare occasions in Nigerian Pidgin, a verb of speaking may be used in both direct and indirect questions in place of a verb of interrogation:

17. Im tel / tok mi [se weting dem giv mi].
3sP tellV+ talkF 1oP [ncI what? 6sP giveF 1oP]
'(S)he asked me what they gave me'. OR '(S)he told me what they gave me.'

It is also possible in indirect questions for a relative clause or a headless relative clause including a question word to be substituted for a noun clause, if an oblique hearer-object is present:

18. (a) Im aks mi di ting we a kuk. OR
3sP askF 1oP ar thing rcl 1sP cookF

- (b) Im aks mi (se – ncI) weting a kuk.
3sP askF 1oP what? 1sP cookF
'(S)he asked me what I cooked.'

While the noun clause introducer *se* is permissible in constructions similar to the second example in 18b, *se* is not allowed in sentences such as the one in 18a.

3.1.4 Noun Clauses as Objects of Requesting/Commanding

The structure used for both direct and indirect reporting of commands is similar to the construction employed for direct and indirect statements. In most instances, the same verbs of speaking are used in the superordinate clause, although as Faraclas (1996: 32) reports, other verbs such as *wont* 'want' are possible here as well but the noun clause objects of these verbs must embody an imperative subjunctive clause:

19. Im tel mi [se '(Mek yu) kuk!']
3sP tell 1oP [ncI (Sjcl 2sP) cookSJ]
'(S)he told me, "cook!"'

20. Im tel mi [se mek a kuk].
3sP tell 1oP [ncI Sjcl 1sP cookSJ]
'(S)he told me to cook.'

21. A tok [se mek dem no kuk].
1sP talkF [ncI Sjcl 6sP ng cookSJ]
'I said that they must not cook.'

3.1.5 Noun Clauses as Objects of Copular Verbs

All copular verbs in Nigerian Pidgin may take syntactic objects under certain conditions. For this reason and because the category *adjective* is absent and primarily replaced by stative verbs, which also accommodate syntactic objects, it becomes very difficult to establish a special class of predicate noun clauses that is not identical in nearly every way to the well-motivated class of object noun clauses. Sentences such as the ones below in numbers 22, 23, and 24 can be said to motivate the assignment of the noun clauses in 25 and 26 to the class of noun clause objects:

22. A de Port Harcourt.

1sP cvF Port Harcourt

‘I am in Port Harcourt.’

23. Moni de mi for porket.

Money cvF 1oP p pocket

‘I have money.’

24. Yu bi jentulman, i no bi –am ?

2sP cvF gentleman 3sD ng cvF -3oP Qù

‘You are a gentleman, isn’t that right?’

25. Di wahala bi [se yu bi jentulman].

ar trouble cvF [ncI 2sP cvF gentleman]

‘The trouble is that you are a gentleman.’

26. I bi laik [se yu go Aba].

3sD cvF cx [ncI 2sP goF Aba]

‘It seems that you went to Aba.’

3.1.6 Noun Clauses as Objects of Mental State Verbs

Stative verbs that tell us about human sentiments and emotions like *gud* ‘be good’, *bad* ‘be bad’ or *hapi* ‘be happy’ can also take noun clause objects:

27. I gud [se yu go Aba].

3sD be goodF [ncI 2sP goF Aba]

‘It is good that you went to Aba.’

28. I gud [se mek yu go Aba]

3sD be goodF [ncI SJcI 2sP F Aba]

‘It is good that you go to Aba.’

29. A hapi [se you go Aba].

1sP be happyF [ncI 2sP goF Aba]

‘I am happy that you went to Aba.’ OR ‘I am happy because you went to Aba.’

The two glosses in example 29, point to the fact that two interpretations are often possible for this type of sentence, depending on whether the noun clause is taken to be occupying the object position as in the first gloss or the adjacent adverbial position in the second gloss.

These interpretations are more fully illustrated by the verb *veks* ‘angry’, which allows more flexibility in the assignment of semantic role to its syntactic subject than does *hapi*:

30. A de veks [se you kuk rais].

1sP -C be angryF [ncI 2sP cookF rice]

‘It is making me angry that you cooked rice.’ OR ‘I am getting angry because you cooked rice.’

31. Im de veks mi [se yu kuk rais].

3sP -C be angry 1oP [ncI 2sP cook rice]

‘It is making me angry that you cooked rice.’ OR ‘I am getting angry because you cooked rice.’

The object noun clause of example 30 is roughly equivalent to example 32:

32. [Se yu kuk rais] de veks mi.

[ncI 2sP cookF rice] -C be angry 1oP

‘That you cooked rice is angering me.’

While the second gloss of example 31 could be restated as in 33 below:

33. [Se yu kuk rais] na im {mek} a de veks.

[ncI 2sP cookF rice] E1 3EP {SJcI} 1sP -C be angry

‘You cooked rice, (that) is why I am getting angry.’

3.1.7 The Use of *Se* in Different Types of Noun Clauses

I concur with Faraclas (1996: 34) that in Nigerian Pidgin noun clause initial position *se* is always optional and never obligatory. However, *se* is accommodated in certain environments while it is not in others. For instance, *se* is more likely to occur:

- a) Before directly reported (quoted) speech, questions, or commands;
- b) Before a pronoun;
- c) After a copular verb or a mental state verb; or
- d) When the noun clause is shifted to sentence-initial position.

Se is less likely to be used:

- a) Before a question-word in indirectly reported questions and
- b) After the focus introducer *na*.

3.2 NON-FINITE NOUN CLAUSES

3.2.1 Multiple Functions

The categories ‘verb’ and ‘noun’ are not in most cases clearly demarcated. A large number of the lexical items grouped as verb or noun may equally belong to either category. When a lexical item leaves a particular category, it drops the arguments, modifiers, and auxiliaries appropriate to the category it leaves and takes on those of the category it enters. However, in most instances a particular item may leave one category without undergoing any form of morphological transformation, syntactic position being the only identifiable criterion for category assignment:

34. waka ‘walk’ (prototypically a verb?)

Na waka we di waka peson de waka wakawaka

EI walk/n rcl ar walk/mn person -C walk/v walk/ip

‘It is walking that the walker walks walk-walk-walk.’

These acrolectal forms can be said to be motivated by several different constructions found in all lects of Nigerian Pidgin as well as by constructions found in Nigerian Standard English (NSE). The non-finite use of [*de* + verb] matches the semantics of the NSE [verb-*ing*] gerund with the semantics of the Nigerian Pidgin incomplete aspect, which is marked by *de*. Syntactically and phonetically, *de* and *tu* do not only resemble each other, but also *to* of the NSE [*to* + verb] infinitive, the Nigerian Pidgin and NSE generic verb *du* and *do* and the Nigerian Pidgin preverbal adverbial *tu* ‘too much’. Agheyisi (1971) describes a similar construction in her Midwestern Nigerian data, which employs [*fo* + verb] where [*de* / *tu* + verb] is used in Port Harcourt. It should be pointed out that Agheyisi does not mention whether the distribution of this form is socially conditioned (Faraclas, 1996: 35).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has been concerned with describing and analysing the noun clauses in Nigerian Pidgin, a language that is increasing in its importance and significance. This exercise demonstrates that there is a sense of order and agreement in Pidgins and Creoles vis-à-vis the Nigerian Pidgin. They are not ‘broken English’ as many would have us believe.

On a broader scale this paper seeks to raise awareness as to the ever evolving significance of Nigerian Pidgin and recognition for the roles it plays and the functions it fulfils in the lives of the over 75 million speakers for whom it has become a de facto lingua franca.

It is my sincere hope that these descriptions and analyses will motivate other scholars to pay more attention to the study of Pidgins and Creoles as languages of moment and consequence.

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APPENDIX

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ABBREVIATIONS

ar	General article
av	Adverb(ial)
c	Clause
C	Consonant
C ⁻	Unexploded consonant
C ^h	Aspirated consonant
+C	Completive aspect
-C	In-completive aspect
cv	Copular verb
cx	Copular extension
D	Dummy pronoun
E	Emphatic/focus (marker)
EP	Emphatic pronoun
f	Phrase-final particle
F	Factitive tense/aspect/modality
H	High tone
I	Introducer
ip	Ideophone
L	Low tone
m	Modifier
n	Noun
N	Syllabic nasal
NP	Nigerian Pidgin
ng	Negative marker
o	Object
p	(General) preposition
P	Pronoun
+P	Past
-P	Non-past
pl	Pluralizer
ps	Possessive pronoun
Qù	YNQ rising intonation
R	Reduplicated form
+R	Realis modality
-R	Irrealis modality
rc	Relative clause
s	Subject

S	Sentence, sentential
SJ	Subjunctive
T	Topic(alizer)
TQ	Topic-switching switching
v	Verb
V	Vowel
V+	Valence-increasing serial verb
YNQ	Yes-no question marker
V ⁿ	Nasalized vowel

SYMBOLS

1, 2, 3, 4, 5,	Persons (1pl=4; 2pl=5; 3pl=6)
6	Question word
?	Exclamatory particle
!	Serialised verb
+	Word boundary
/+/	Phrase stress group boundary
/=/	Stressed syllable follows
'	Narrow pharynx ('short') vowels
<u>o</u> , <u>e</u>	Acrolectal speech
@	Basilectal speech
#	Ungrammatical sentence
*	x Varies with y
x/y	

(Adapted from Faraclas, 1996)