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STUDENT PIDGIN (SP): THE LANGUAGE OF THE EDUCATED MALE ELITE

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Introduction

This essay is about a language that apparently does not exist. It was spawned about thirty years ago and has developed into an extended pidgin, which will be referred to as Student Pidgin (SP), and which is spoken by male university students in Ghana's five universities and used nearly exclusively for their out-of-classroom communicative needs. Outside the educational institutions, WAP¹ or GhaPE² (Magnus Huber's term) plays a very minor role in Ghana's linguistic repertoire. SP is a WAP and therefore a variety of GhaPE. Huber's suggestion that it be regarded as the acrolectal manifestation of GhaPE will be accepted for the purposes of this paper – especially since it exhibits the same distinct features as GhaPE where the latter differs from the other WAPs. The completive *don*, for example, is not found in GhaPE nor in SP, nor is the copulative *na* found in either. In this paper GhaPE refers to pidgin that is spoken in town as opposed to SP, which is spoken primarily by male students on the secondary and tertiary campuses and also by the male products of these institutions (Dako: 1999).

When the census was taken in Ghana in 2000, questions concerning 'language', i.e. L1(s) and additional languages spoken, were included. This was the first time information on language had been sought in a census in Ghana since 1960. Yet when students were subsequently asked whether they had given Pidgin as one of their languages, the response was an embarrassed NO. Several students could tell, however, that they had actually spoken Pidgin with the census officials who interviewed them. It can be estimated that possibly 80 – 90 % of Ghanaian males below the age of 50 with secondary or tertiary education speak a code which they refer to as Pidgin and which this paper refers to as SP. This pidgin marks itself as different from GhaPE.

The Ghanaian Language Scene

The language scene in Ghana is the typical post-colonial New English Second Language scenario, in which English is the official language. In addition, according to how one defines a language or which criteria one uses to isolate a language, it is generally estimated that there are between 42-55 languages in Ghana. Six of these are given air time in the public broadcasting system and are used in official, written communications: Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, Hausa and Nzema. Of these, two can be described as lingua francas: Twi (Akan) and Hausa. It has unfortunately not been possible to elicit any information from the Statistical Service who conducted the 2000 census on language distribution in Ghana. The 1960 figures are thus the only ones available, but it can be assumed that the influence of Hausa has declined considerably over the last decades due to increased access to education (Hausa is associated with illiterate segments of the population), the general economic decline, and the 1969 Aliens Compliance Order that expelled large numbers of non-Ghanaians who did not have the requisite residence papers.³ It can also be assumed that more than 64% (1960 figure) of Ghanaians can use an Akan language.

Contrary to the situation in other Anglophone West African countries such as Nigeria or Cameroon, Pidgin has never played any significant role in the linguistic repertoire of Ghana. Magnus Huber's work on what he calls GhaPE is the first in-depth study of Pidgin in Ghana.

Pidgin has always been considered an alien phenomenon that came with immigrants from predominantly Liberia (Kru Brofo [Kru English]) and Nigeria (Abongo Brofo [Barracks Pidgin]), and Pidgin as spoken by the Nsumfo (People of the Water) – Nigerians who were traders in Ghana up till 1969 (Aliens Compliance Order) and hailed predominantly from the riverine areas of Nigeria, e.g. Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw, and more recently (1982), the million+ Ghanaians expelled from Nigeria.⁴ Whatever its origins, and this discussion will not be entered into here, Pidgin has always been a low prestige, marginal language associated with illiteracy and the deprived multi-ethnic urban areas of the coastal towns. Today GhaPE is losing out to Twi, as Twi is assuming an increasingly important role as the lingua franca of Ghana.

The Emergence of Student Pidgin

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s,⁵ a pidgin began to be heard in the high-prestige multi-ethnic coastal secondary schools and from there followed its speakers into the tertiary institutions. It emerged partly as a reaction against the predominance of English in the school system, a 'foreign' language that was no longer adequately taught, a language the students could not identify with and a language whose informal registers the students did not master. It was also a reflection of acculturation. By being isolated in boarding schools and later university campuses, removed from traditional, i.e. family and cultural influences, the students assumed behavioural aspects of 'marginal-deviant groups' (Stoller 1979: 72). These groups included the military as described below and also the more aggressive behavioural tendencies of their urban colleagues. The phenomenon of SP started in the prestigious, coastal male secondary schools, and a considerable percentage of the pupils in these schools came from the political/ administrative upper middle class that was in formation in the immediate post-independence years. In addition, in the late 1960s and again in the early 1970s, Ghana was under military rule. Soldiers were very visible on the streets, they openly and aggressively displayed their power, *and they spoke Pidgin*. Student Pidgin developed in this environment. The code connoted power, 'macho' behaviour, (Dadzie (1985) and also Goyvaerts (1998) on the Swahili hybrid *Indoubil*), and eluded performance pressure. According to Tawiah (1998), out of 50 males randomly selected from the University of Ghana's Halls of Residence, 47 said they spoke pidgin, i.e. SP. Of the 3 respondents who claimed not to speak pidgin, 2 were older 'mature' students who had not gone through the normal secondary education system and had thus not been in an environment where SP was spoken. The third was a 'born again' Christian who claimed he could not speak it and who expressed the view that SP deflected from serious academic studies; he considered it a purposeless frivolity. Out of 50 female students randomly selected, only 3 admitted knowledge of SP. Student Pidgin is thus gender specific (Dako 1999).

What is SP?

Defining Student Pidgin is problematic.

- First of all, the majority of students in Ghanaian universities have at least two languages in common: Standard English, and it is estimated that between 80-90% also have knowledge of Twi. Students of the same ethnic group use SP when speaking to each other. SP did not therefore evolve from a communicative need, even though a Ghanaian university is a melting pot of so to speak all ethnic groups in the country.
- SP is also a language of neutrality, for there is no doubt that there is some uneasiness in the country about what at times is referred to as 'Akan linguistic imperialism'.
- Among male students Twi is also perceived as polite and decorous and therefore not a suitable vehicle for the discourse of male peer groups.
- P also reflects a dilemma of identity. Both Forson and Huber mention SP's function as peer group cohesive.
- SP is today an important lingua franca and a social leveller.

- SP is definitely sociolectal in nature, see also Blommert and Gysels, (1990) on Campus Kiswahili. It marks itself as distinct from GhaPE (as spoken in town). The speaker is recognised as having attended secondary school or higher institutions of learning.
- Magnus Huber suggests a cline of Pidgin in Ghana – a post-basic continuum and views SP as the acrolectal manifestation.
- No direct link from Kru Brofo or Abongo Brofo to Student Pidgin has been established.

Where did it come from? Information gleaned from discussion with colleagues who were in secondary school in the late 60s and early 70s suggests that SP started as an attempt at reproduction of Pidgin as they heard it in town – especially from the soldiers. SP in its incipient stage could therefore be considered ‘a pidgin sound-alike’. It was from the beginning a daring attempt at deviancy – a flouting of the school rules that prohibited the use of local languages. It then stabilised over the years as Pidgin gained prominence at every coup juncture: 1972, 1979, 1981 and then finally from the expelled illegal emigrants from Nigeria in 1983.

Lexis

1. SP marks itself as different from GhaPE by not using distinctive Pidgin vocabulary:

GhaPE: pikin	SP: kiddi
GhaPE: sabe	SP: know
GhaPE: thief (v)	SP: steal

2. Because speakers of SP can draw on other common languages to supplement their vocabulary and also their structures, SP exhibits a different vocabulary from GhaPE, and code switching is much more noticeable, embedding both SE and (predominantly) Twi and Ga vocabulary and structures.⁶ Singler (1983) argues that the more homogeneous the substratal, the more noticeable its influence. Yet SP falls within the categorisation WAP and the same can thus be said of SP as Givon (1979:12) said of Krio, “The bulk of the vocabulary comes from English. But the bulk of grammar is unmistakably Kwa.”

Code Switching

The following conversation taken from Nettey (2001: 37-38) reproduces a conversation that switches between SP, Ga, Fanti and SE.⁷

[Key: SP= italics, Ga: italics underlined, SE: bold, Fanti: bold italics]

- A: *Jú brɔ́dás, jú hé wat de go on fo de skú́l insáid?*
You brothers, have you heard what is going on in the school?
- B: *Wát bi dát?* What is it?
- C: *Àlì Bàbá im mata?* Ali Baba's case?
- A: *Je – ba de mã nó trai.* Yes, but that is a bad thing that he did.
- A: *Àsɔ́mua: júlo ní.*
Apparently [English loanward <assume> in Ga] he is a thief).
- C: *Be dané: kɔ́jo kéɔ?* Doesn't Kojo always say so?
- A: *But ené lé: bad.* But this is bad.

- A: *Ba ju nó gò tók sòm fò ju màn?*
But are you not going to defend your friend?
- B: *Wat a get tók? If i gò sti:l den i bi fulif bɔɪ.*
What have I got to say? If what he wants to do is steal, then he is a foolish boy.
- D: *Jú pipel sef war? If Àlì Bàbá gò sti:l, wei i bi Kwamí im padi, I bi Kwàmí gò sti:l?*
Why are you bothering him? If Ali Baba has gone to steal something and he is Kwame's friend, does this mean that Kwame is also a thief?
- D: *Nyejea jeme- jee wɔfee wɔ naanyo ni?*
You people should get away. Isn't he a friend to all of us all?
- B: *Gò wei ju – ba ma buk nɔ fà maadzi ma mi.*
Go away – but my book – give my thing to me (Fanti).

SE vocabulary from domains not usually associated with Pidgin and salient use of English function words are observed in the following exchange:

- A: *Ju liv in hegemony wei ju nɔ nɔ.*
You live in hegemony, and you don't know it.
- B: *Wi nɔ de tók about hegemony fò he, wi de tók about corrupt political leaders who are amassing wealth.*
- C: *See how Eli de tók som authority. Meanwhile ju de folow di:s piple on dema wild goose chase.*
Listen to the way Eli speaks, like some authority. Meanwhile you follow these people on their wild goose chase.

Structure

Huber (1999:276) lists several aspects where SP differs from GhaPE. (The examples used to demonstrate usage are mine)

- 1) Whereas in GhaPE, the possessive 1st and 3rd person plural are *àua* (wi) and *dea* (dem, de) respectively, SP, uses *wana* for the 1st person plural and *dema* for the 3rd person plural possessive:

ba wana ri:ding rum i bi ekon
but our reading room is air-conditioned

ɔ:l de seim Commonwealth dema dis ting i nɔ bi bad
all the same, what Commonwealth Hall is doing isn't bad.

- 2) The negative-completive function of *neva* is virtually non-existent in GhaP, but is a prominent feature in SP:

<i>a neva gò fɔget</i>	I'll not forget
<i>i neva bi Ì sista</i>	she is definitely not his sister.

- 3) Whereas a genitive relationship is expressed in GhaP as N+N:

<i>Kofi sista</i>	Kofi's sister
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SP has the sequence: N+Pron. +N:

<i>Kofi in sista</i>	Kofi's sister
<i>mumù im [i] food bi de best</i>	mother's food is the best.

- 4) Locative constructions with *insai* and *autsai* in post NP position. This is not as prominent a feature of SP as Huber suggests. My data shows evidence of it, but my informants claim it is in fact rarely used and might be less frequent in SP than in GhaP. My data show no example of *autsai*, and my informants claim it is not used.

if ju wan kontinju wid de English fo de sekon jea insai die I mi:ns se ju...
if you want to continue with English in the second year, it means that you...

if ju wan kontinju plas English fo second jea
if you continue with English in your second year

ju brodas, ju he: wat de go on fo de skul insai
brothers, have you heard what has happened in school?

Note: *I dé de ru:m* it is in the room (no *insaid*).

- 5) Huber states: "the use of the copula *bi* as a topicaliser, e.g. in *som komandos bi* (police) commandos"; *bi* is not a copula here, it is an Akan post-positioned indefinite pronoun and thus a reiteration of the pronoun *som*:

ju de pei som laik som fifti (bi bi) regulaly bi
you pay something like fifty regularly

I swolow som bon bi
he swallowed a bone
(Heard in SP – though probably more common in 'town'. Actually reduplication of the pronoun 'some').

- 6) Use of 3rd person plural *dem* (they) rather than the GhaP *dei*.

den do dem wan, wan, wan
then do them one at a time.

- 7) Preference for *tfali* (Charlie)⁸ [also in GhaP],

o tfali i ha:d o:
Charlie – times are really hard.

- 8) Huber lists the following items as typical for the student variety. These need to be considered in detail:

a) *den* 'and' is used when listing persons and objects and when not very disparate things are linked:

Ama den Abena den Kofi
Ama and Abena and Kofi

Otherwise *wei* is used as copula in linking longer structures. *Wei* would thus normally have been used in the following:

i ask am den [wei] i de tel mi se de ting go bi ova su:n
I asked him and he told me that it was going to be over soon.

b) Huber lists *huk* as 'hold' in SP, but *huk* indicates an aggressive hold – *hold* is the common:

ai huk am

I held him in an aggressive manner and was about to fight him

ai si: Kofi den i huk in gel

I saw Kofi with his arm around his girl (connotes possessiveness)

ai si: Kofi den i hould in gel

I saw Kofi embrace her/ hold her hand (connotes fondness)

c) In GhaPE: *plas* means 'and', whereas in SP *plas* means 'with'.

if ju wan konyinju plas English fo sekon je:

if you continue with English in the second year

d) *wikit* as 'serious'; *brutal* as 'nice'; *bad* as 'good'; *ref* (rough) as 'impressive' etc.

i.e. the use of adjectival antonyms. This is typical university/ secondary school slang and does not identify SP. The tendency also found in London Jamaican and BEV.

The following features, that are typical of SP but not listed in Huber, will be added to this list:

9) Use of the Akan contrastive *die*:

if ino bi so die I bi wi no se wi go de sufa

if that isn't the case, we are the ones who will suffer.

10) The use of the Akan negative emphatic to suggest something inexcusable: *kura*: (at all).

20K die I no gud kura:

twenty thousand, isn't good at all.

11) The use of the Akan post-determiner *nɔ̃* in post nominal (noun and pronoun) position:

i bi ma buk nɔ̃

it is my book

i bi de haus nɔ̃ bi dat

this is the house [I told you about]

(Note also the English pre-determiner *de* in pre-nominal position, [Det.+N+Det.] is a very common NP structure i.e. in SP)

12) Use of *nɔ̃ɔ̃* (Ga), that anticipates 'an unexpected situation' 'immediately':

we de de rum nɔ̃ɔ̃ wei we he se sombodi de skri:m

We were there in the room and [unexpectedly] we heard that somebody was screaming

NB: When *nɔ̃ɔ̃* appears in post-nominal position it could easily be confounded with the post-determiner *nɔ̃*, but the former is accentuated, carries high tone and the nasalised vowel is lengthened.

13) Use of the contrastive *be* (Ga) or *se* (Twi) (depending on the language more spoken) to introduce questions that require or expect an affirmative response. This is not considered polite in either speech community, as somehow anticipating disagreement.

be ai teik giv ju

I gave it to you didn't I

se ai teik give ju

(rare among non-Akan speakers)

14) Akan intensifiers: *ɔ:*, *pa:*, *a:*

i tru ɔ: man de taia ɔ:

it is true, one gets tired.

Yeboah i plei som ɔ:

Yeboah did play)unfortunately without much success; sympathetic).

i tru pa:

it is very true

Yeboa i plei som pa:

Yeboah really played – and with success

pipel dilei i meridj plans pa:

people delayed his marriage plans

ai trai a: ba a no de get am

I put in a lot of effort but did not succeed

Yeboa i plei som a::

Yeboah played, but it was not so good.

15) Lower frequency of reduplication. Post intensification is preferred. If reduplication occurs it tends to involve longer sequences:

wana PE masta i bi him, i bi him no (Akan post-det)

it was our PE master, it was really him

wana PE masta i bi him, i bi him nɔ: (Ga emph)

it was our PE master, he suddenly appeared.

16) Plural noun forms tend to be kept in SP:

postpone al i programs

postpone all his programmes

i hav plenti hausis

he has plenty houses

ju brodas, ju hé wat de go ón...
you brothers, have you heard what is going on?

17) SP uses the prenominal determiner *de*:

i bi laik de Linguistics Department
as in the case of the Linguistics Department

de ting dei dei fo do
the things they do!

18) Akan post-determiner *pe* 'only':

wei I bi laik todei pe wei de go
they went only today

todei sef pe wi get am
we only got it today.

19) More varied use of function words: both from SE and from Twi and Ga as demonstrated above and more use of structures that have been calqued from predominantly Akan and Ga.

The following examples demonstrate sequences in SP that are calqued from Twi and Ga. These would not be heard in GhaPE.

SE: Give it to me
Twi: Fa ma me
SP: *Teik giv me*

SE: I've had my fill
Twi: Màmé
SP: *A sàti*

SE: I am not going with you, am I?
Twi: Se enye me ni wu na eko?
Ga: Be jee mi ke bo yaa?
SP: *Be i nó bi mi den ju de gó?*

SE: It has all been broken.
Twi: Ninyinaa ebubu
SP: *Al brek brek*

SE: When I went today I was told.
Twi: Me koo ene na wo kae
SP: *A go todei wei dei tel mi*

SE: Take care of my books for me.
Twi: Hwe me books no so ma me
SE: *Luk ma buks top giv mi*

SE: I am in trouble
Twi: Mi hu akyin me
SP: *Ma bodi katsh mi*

- SE: The time is 3 o'clock
Twi: A bo 3 o'clock
SP: *Inok 3 o'clock*
- SE: You have some money with me
Twi: Wo sika bi wo me ho
SP: *Som ju moni de ma de:*
- SE: They found the drugs on him
Twi: Wo unu eduro no wo no hu
SP: *Dei si: de dreg fo in bodi.*
- SE: I went home to see
Twi: Meko fie ho ko hwe
SP: *A go de haus de: go si:*
- SE: She's gone to do her hair
Twi: O ko ye ni ti
SP: *I de go do in he:*
- SE: I intentionally went by his house to see if Kofi was there.
Twi: Me hyee da ko faa Kofi fie se mehu se wo ho anaa
SP: *A sheda go pas in haus si: if Kofi de de*

Concluding Remarks

SP is today a stabilised pidgin. It exhibits structural and lexical possibilities that go far beyond GhaPE. Because it is spoken by the most influential groups in the country, it will most likely extend its influence to be spoken in more and more domains. Interestingly enough, Pidgin is never heard on any phone-in on any of Ghana's numerous FM stations. This is most likely because pidgin speakers in Ghana, the speakers of SP that is, speak SE, and would chose this code in formal discourse – other Ghanaians would chose a Ghanaian language. One does therefore hear a lot of Twi and Hausa, and in Accra, Ga, on these stations. Pidgin appears, on the other hand, to be increasingly used in advertising and public education programmes, and is for example being used in the drive against AIDS in which the young male population is targeted.

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Notes

¹ West African Pidgin.

² Ghanaian Pidgin English.

³ The Aliens' Compliance Order of 1969 expelled non-Ghanaians from neighbouring states who did not have the right residence papers and work-permits. Some expatriate families who had lived in Ghana for generations were affected.

⁴ In 1982 Nigeria expelled all Ghanaians illegally resident in Nigeria. It is estimated that well over one million, possibly close to two million Ghanaians returned to Ghana upon this expulsion. As those were Ghanaians with relatively low levels of education, they had acquired Pidgin in Nigeria and since most of the 'returnees' congregated in urban areas, this gave the use of Pidgin an additional impetus in Ghana.

⁵ Dadzie (1985) drawing on his experience as a pupil at St. Augustine's at Cape Coast, claims it started earlier, but this cannot be substantiated by surveys conducted among his contemporaries at this and other secondary schools.

⁶ Even though Akan (Twi) is the largest language in Ghana today, Ga has always had a peculiar role in the schools in the country. Since it is traditionally the language of the capital, Accra, it has come to connote, on the one hand sophistication, but on the other hand male aggression. Twi, on the other hand, is associated with decorum and traditional values. It is clear from surveys that students feel they have more license for profanity when speaking Ga than would be the case with Twi. 'There are certain things you cannot say in Twi', as one student put it.

⁷ In some cases an approximate phonetic transcription has been attempted – in others, current orthography has been used.

⁸ Ghanaian English. *Charlie* is the appellation used by young men in informal discourse.