

## THE PIDGIN-LANGUAGE EXPERIMENT IN MODERN NIGERIAN POETRY: A STUDY OF EZENWA-OHAETO'S *I WAN BI PRESIDENT*

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the resourcefulness of the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as a communication vehicle in poetry, a domain hitherto dominated by Standard English. The study is motivated by the increasing use of the language in poetic expression in Nigeria, and the discovery that people who ordinarily were averse to poetry find interest in it when presented in Nigerian pidgin. Unlike earlier studies in NP poetry this study adopts the linguistic-stylistic approach in analyzing Ezenwa-Ohaeto's "I Wan Bi President," the longest poem in his experimental collection by that title. The study revealed that all stylistic dimensions possible with poetry in Standard English are equally possible with poetry in NP. It also revealed that NP is more accessible as language of poetic expression given its relatively more simplified grammatical structures. In addition the graphic, descriptive and comic facilities of the NP enable poets to elaborate serious themes in an equally entertaining style. The study observed that despite the lack of standard orthography, Nigerian Pidgin has continued to grow in use and acceptance. It thus projected that the trend would continue, and that through borrowing from and exploitation of the linguistic potentials of its donor languages, the vocabulary of NP would be expanded and its writing system may ultimately acquire a stable tradition.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Pidgin, Poetic Expression, Linguistic-stylistics

### **Introduction**

Modern Nigerian poetry has produced a good number of published poems in the Nigerian Pidgin (NP). Some of the writers have turned out full-length poetry volumes in the language, and the number continues to grow as more poets become aware of the resourcefulness of the language and its creative potentiality. This increasing interest of creative writers in the use of Nigerian Pidgin as communication vehicle in poetry, a domain hitherto dominated by formal or Standard English is one of the motivations for this investigation. In addition, it has been observed that readers or audience who ordinarily were averse to poetry find interest in it when presented in NP. Ezenwa-Ohaeto himself in an introductory comment to his poetry collection *I WAN BI PRESIDENT (Poems in formal and pidgin English)* from which the poem of study is taken, noted as follows: "...I have been reading my poems written in

both formal and pidgin English to various audiences in Nigeria. But after each reading of the pidgin poems, I have come away with a sense of satisfaction that the poems touched some inner chords and also a sense of overwhelming acceptance of pidgin poetry” (viii). This observation constitutes additional motivation for this study.

Thus this essay examines the resourcefulness of the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as a communication vehicle in poetry. Unlike earlier studies in NP poetry this study adopts the linguistic-stylistic approach. The title poem of Ezenwa-Ohaeto’s experimental collection *I WAN BI PRESIDENT* is used as source of data for the study. The choice of this poem is informed by the prominence given to it by the poet: using it as the title of the entire collection, which presupposes that it embodies the central theme of the work. In addition, it is the longest poem in the volume, and the last poem of the section three entitled “CYCLONES”, which also makes it the climax of the collection.

The study leans on the Constructionist Theory, which accounts for all of our knowledge of language as patterns of form and function. According to Goldberg, who developed the theory, it is “a new theoretical approach that allows linguistic observations about form-meaning pairing, known as ‘constructions,’ to be stated directly” (219). He adds that constructionist approaches aim to account for the full range of facts about language, without assuming that a particular subset of data is part of a privileged ‘core’. Kris Romanda (61) explains that Goldberg’s argument was that sentence meaning was determined not only by the verb and its arguments, but also by the construction in which these occur. In other words, in construction-based grammar, it is understood that words alone cannot account for the wide range of semantic meaning conveyed in a language. Syntactic organization can encode semantic information as well, in that the way words are arranged can impact the meaning of a phrase, independent of the individual words themselves. In fact, as a general principle, any change in syntactic form will entail, to a greater or lesser degree, a difference in meaning. That is the principle of No Synonymy of Grammatical Forms. This lies behind the development of Construction Grammar.

By the end of this study the following research questions would have been answered:

1. How viable is Nigerian Pidgin as language of poetic expression?
2. To what extent does poetry in NP lend itself to a linguistic-stylistic analysis?
3. To what degree has Ezenwa-Ohaeto been able to express his message in “I Wan Bi President” using Nigerian Pidgin?

### **The Emergence of Nigerian Pidgin**

The definition, origins and development of Nigeria Pidgin (NP) have been elaborately discussed in pioneering studies such as Mafeni (1971), Todd (1984), Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and Faraclas (1996) to mention a few. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to note that pidgin generally is regarded as a marginal or makeshift kind of language which emanates from a contact situation between people(s) with different L1. Zabus thinks such a language “can arise in a matter of hours whenever people speaking mutually unintelligible languages need to communicate (117). Nigerian Pidgin is therefore a pidgin that arose from such contact and need between multilingual coastal communities of Nigeria and the European visitors made up of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the English. The NP was thus originally developed as a simplified means of communication between Nigerians and the Europeans, especially the English, for the specific purposes of trade and exploration. Elugbe explains that by Nigerian Pidgin, “we specifically mean Nigerian Pidgin English...” but “since it is the only pidgin which has a geographic base which is national... it is simply called Nigerian Pidgin” (286). NP is English-based, having English as its main lexifier. Since it has Nigerian languages as its substrate or underlying influence, the vocabulary of NP is said to be English while its grammar is Nigerian.

The stabilization of the contact between the visiting Europeans, especially the English, and their Nigerian hosts led to the expansion of NP. But the later emergence of a standard variety of English and the establishment of schools where this was taught, making it the language of trade and industry, mission work and government in Nigeria posed some challenge to NP since this variety became so important that its mastery was a passport to a good position in the society with its social and material benefits (Elugbe and Omamor 21). Nevertheless, NP remained useful since not everyone had access to school and the process of acquiring the standard variety was decidedly longer and more tedious than that of acquiring NP. The language has therefore “...survived and flourished by generally being readily useful and handy, thus filling a veritable communication vacuum in Nigeria” (Elugbe 288).

Today, the NP “has developed from being a limited language of trade and business along the coastal regions of Nigeria to a full-fledged language in its own rights as a result of acquisition of new vocabulary items to meet the expanded communication challenges of its speakers” (Mensar 210). Indeed, the functions of NP have become so extensive that it is now used in all genres of literature, especially poetry, in Nigeria. Ezenwa-Ohaeto corroborates this assertion by observing that “it is in poetry that this language (NP) has been most effectively employed to create a bridge of orality, especially in the attempt to demonstrate, develop and exploit its artistic resources...” (70). Some of the Nigerian authors who have experimented with NP in their poetry

works include Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, Mamman Vasta, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tunde Fatunde, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Bassey Ekpenyong, Tanure Ojaide, Segun Oyekunle, and recently Eriata Oribhabor, etc. For a successful and comprehensive stylistic study of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's pidgin poem "I Wan bi President", the following procedure of analysis is adopted: the graphological patterns, syntactic mode, sound devices, and lexico-semantic choices.

### **The Graphological Patterns**

Graphology is "the analogous study of a language's writing system, or orthography, as seen in various kinds of handwriting and typography... distinctive uses of punctuation, capitalization, spacing and so on" (Crystal and Davy, 18). It deals primarily with the printed matter of a text and its arrangement. Creative writers, especially poets, often deploy the graphology of their works for stylistic effect. Our text of study shows evidence of this deployment in its structural pattern, spacing, use of capitalization, word character or typeface and punctuation.

Structurally, the text which is written in free verse is patterned into twenty (20) unequal stanzas of three (3) to fifteen (15) lines each, with equal spacing between the stanzas. This feature which allows for division of poetic thoughts for piecemeal assimilation is also a common feature of poetry in Standard English. However, some kind of indentation is employed in stanza seventeen (17) to draw the reader's attention to exclamatory questions as follows:

I wan bi President  
Make my people enjoy too  
    Wetin bi federal character  
Every industry go dey there  
    Wetin bi disadvantaged area  
Every appointment go go there  
    Wetin bi geographical spread  
Every promotion go bi for them  
Federal character na for person wey no get broder,

By stylistically using initial spacing for the questions the poet chose to dispense with the conventional question or exclamation mark.

Capitalization is another graphological feature which is employed for stylistic effect in the poem. The word 'president' which ordinarily is a common noun has been used with initial capital all through the text. This immediately suggests the centrality of the word to the message of the poet, hence his decision to give it prominence and emphasis by way of initial capitalization. It also presupposes that the poet has used the word as a proper noun with a particular powerful individual-referent in mind, whose name the poet could not just mention without consequences. Of course the poem was written

during the military era of General Ibrahim Babangida. Besides this other uses of capitalization in the text are generally conventional.

For word character and print typeface, we notice the use of large characters and bold type face for the words of the title to distinguish it from the body of the poem. This is conventional. But the title of the poem does not begin a fresh page as is usually the convention; rather it begins immediately after the last stanza of a preceding one. This feature graphically indicates that the poems in each section of the collection form one fluid-whole united by a common theme. And in this regard 'cyclone' (violent rotating windstorm) is used as metaphor for the biting socio-political theme binding our section of interest.

The same idea of fluidity and unity runs through the entire fifty (50) lines and twenty (20) stanzas of the poem. Thus, the use of punctuation marks is sparse. Every stanza flows into another like cyclone, separated by a comma, until the last line of the final stanza when a full stop is inserted to indicate an end.

### **The Syntactic Mode**

Syntax has to do with the structure of the sentence, and the set of rules, principles and processes governing this in a given language. Potter observes that "syntax is the basis of sentence patterns," referring to these patterns as "ordering together, systematic arrangement" (104). Syntactic mode therefore encompasses the choice of sentence and clause types, and their constituent grammatical elements. In the text of study there is structurally, a predominance of short simple and complex sentences, one compound and no compound-complex sentences. This preference for short and simple sentences is not unusual with poetry, even in Standard English, which deals with brevity and terseness of expressions. It also helps to enhance the simplicity of the NP poetry, and in turn guarantees quick and easy assimilation. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of the use of code-switched and code-mixed structures, structures that are partly NP and partly SE. Some examples and their pure NP equivalents include:

1. Every car go run comot for road too (stanza 6: line 6)  
All motto go follow run comot for road
2. Some presidents dem dey (11: 8 and 13)  
President dem dey
3. If you see president him children (9: 5)  
If you see president im pikin dem
4. Na special treatment dem go get (9:7)  
Na better service dem go get
5. If dem publish newspaper or magazine (18:6)  
If dem write paper
6. Dem go address me as snake wey get forest (19:8)

Dem go dey kol me snake wey get bush

Munzali Jibril has attempted to account for the above feature in NP by observing that “as a consequence of the use of NP in domain hitherto restricted to (Standard) English, NP now trespasses freely into (Standard) English syntax to borrow structures which are clearly non-NP” (237). However, such borrowing should be expected where NP lacks an equivalent. The examples above show that the Standard English structures used in the text have an equivalent in NP, so their choice could hardly be for structural or vocabulary inadequacy of the NP. We may therefore choose from two possible reasons: either that the Standard English structures are employed deliberately and stylistically by the poet to ridicule the President persona’s unrestrained freedom to do as he pleased, or they are sheer cases of Standard English interference.

Functionally, the sentences in the text are all declarative, except in stanza seventeen (17) as earlier quoted, lines three (3), five (5) and seven (7), where the poet uses exclamatory questions to highlight the ease with which the ‘President’ gets whatever he wants without regard for due process. This predominance of declarative sentences is an indication that the poet is very much informed about his subject matter. In this case, he wishes to be ‘President’ and he knows exactly the privileges and immunities enjoyed by the occupant of the office. He thus goes on to inform his audience about these facts and his predicament as a result of his inordinate ambition.

The clause structure of the text indicates a variety of choices. A clause is simply a grammatical unit that operates at a level lower than the sentence but higher than the phrase in the grammatical rank scale. It has its own subject and predicate and is part of a (larger) sentence. The combination of the main and subordinate clauses enables a writer to communicate effectively. It is evident in the text that the poet utilized the use of subordination to achieve suspense and thus retain the interest of his readers. Using the Systemic linguistic model, which gives the sequence of clause structure as S-P-C-A, where S is subject, P is predicator, C is complement and A is adverbial, we shall examine some instances of clause structure in the NP text.

1. Egetone dream/ Weydey worryme (1:1 & 2)  

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | P | C | S | P | C |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
2. IfIsleepsmall/ Nahimde dreamgo come (2: 1 &2)  

|   |   |   |   |     |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|---|
| A | S | P | A | S/P | A | S | P |
|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|---|
3. WhenInever seewaterdrink/ Nahimde dreamgo come (3: 4 & 5)  

|   |   |   |   |   |     |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|---|
| A | S | P | C | A | S/P | A | S | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|-----|---|---|---|

The mobility of the A element in NP just like in Standard English (SE) is evident in the above examples. Beyond that we also observe a peculiar feature in NP which does not obtain in SE: two elements are jointly realized by one item. For example, the NP word ‘na’ which means ‘it is’ or ‘that is’ in SE realizes the S and P elements in an NP clause. This is part of the simplified nature of the NP’s grammatical structure.

### Sound Devices

Sound or phonological devices are generally employed in poetry to enhance its entertaining quality as well as to reinforce or emphasize the message of the poet. NP poetry is not excluded from this feature. However, the use of such devices in African poetry is usually scanty and inconsistent, the reason being that African poets, unlike their Western counterparts, are more concerned about the prevalent socio-political problems of their societies which have to reflect in the tone and structure of their works than with mere musical entertainment. Nevertheless, our text reveals a conscious attempt by Ezenwa-Ohaeto to imbue his poetry with musical features and entertaining qualities, even as he explores the serious theme of military misrule in his country. This perhaps is part of the reasons why Nwachukwu-Agbada describes him as ‘Ezenwa-Ohaeto: Poet of the *Njakiri* Genre’ (153). Some of the sound elements observed in the text, which we shall examine, include: repetition, anaphora and epiphora, rhyme, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia.

Indeed, it is the device of repetition that the poet exploits to the fullest in his attempt to entertain his reader-audience, reinforce his theme and project his subject matter. Thus, the word *president* features at least once in almost all the stanzas, while the clause ‘I wan bi President’ is repeated as stanza introduction from stanza thirteen (13) to the very last stanza twenty (20). Stanzas two (2) and sixteen (16) below are not only stylistically appealing, but also notable for their musical effect:

1. If I sleep small
2. Na him de dream go come
3. If I close eye small
4. Na him de dream go come
5. If I siddon for chair
6. Say make I rest small
7. Na him de dream go come
8. I think say na malaria dey come (2)

1. I wan bi President
2. If food no dey market I no worry
3. If dem say price don rise I no go worry
4. If salary no come on time I no go worry
5. If petrol dey cost too much I no go worry

6. If sanitation exercise dey I no go worry
7. If na religion trouble dey I no go worry (16)

Almost all the identified sound devices feature in stanza (2) above. The sound /s/ is alliterated in ‘sleep small’ (line 1). Also, /d/ is alliterated in ‘de dream’ (lines 2, 4 and 7). There is assonance of the sound /ai/ in ‘I’ and ‘eye’ (line 3), and /e/ in ‘Say’ and ‘make’ (line 6) as well as in ‘say’, ‘mal<sup>a</sup>ria’ and ‘dey’ (line 8). Then, there is end rhyme of alternate type ‘abab’ realized by the alternate use of ‘small’ and ‘come’ at line endings in stanza (2). Similarly, the repeated use of the word ‘worry’ at line endings in stanza (6) produces a uniform rhyme. Indeed, the clauses ‘Na him de dream go come’ in stanza (2) and ‘I no go worry’ in stanza (16) have been deliberately used repeatedly by the poet to create a refrain or chorus so as to get his reader-audience fully involved in the poetic experience. Notice that the clause repetition in stanza (16) is epiphoric.

The text also utilizes interplay of anaphora and parallelism to enhance audience participation as is evident in stanza (7):

Dem go close de road  
 Dem go close even air too  
 Dem go take one car carry am  
 Dem go take another one dey follow  
 All dem vehicle tyre dey new  
 All dem vehicle engine dey new

...

Onomatopoeia features in stanza (6) lines (4) and (5) thus:

Na siren dey clear road  
 Dey make param param piroo piroo

On the overall, it is observed that all sound devices possible with poetry in Standard English also feature effectively in this NP poetry.

### **Lexico-Semantic Choices**

In this section interest is in how the choice of words and syntax of the sentence enhance the message and interpretation of the text. The section shall accommodate lexical, semantic and figurative features. Lexically, the poet has carefully selected his words to suit his purpose; thus we find more of nouns, pronouns and adjectives in the text. Also, we observe a predominance of concrete over abstract nouns, which is not surprising because the poet is dealing with observable excesses in his society. The first person singular pronoun ‘I’ dominates in the text, suggesting the direct involvement of the poet in the experience he shares. It also provides some kind of shield behind which the poet hides to freely unleash his satirical punches; after all it is himself that he talks to or about. Most of the adjectives in the text illustrate comfort and enjoyment which according to the poet are attributes of



‘President’. Examples, in context, include: vehicle tyre dey new (7:5), De seat go clean well well (7:7), body dey fat well well (9:2), special treatment (9:7), red carpet (12:2), best hotel (12:5), special woman (12:6), beautiful wife (14:2), plenty title (19:2), etc. However, there are instances of adjectives and verbs describing difficulty and suffering which the poet has used in contrast with the position of a ‘President’ such as: hungry (5:1), thirsty (5:2), worry (5:3), walk ten miles (8:1), push truck (8:5), cry (13:2), weep (13:4), etc. By this contrasting collocation, the poet is able to communicate the existence of two worlds in his society: one for the ‘President’ and his cohorts, the other for the masses where the poet belongs, hence his dream to be ‘President’.

Significantly, the text features numerous Standard English words and spellings which betray the poet as a non-L1 user of NP, as well as the fact that he is writing in NP for the first time. Some instances and their NP equivalents include:

- ‘tire’ against ‘taya’ (stanza 1, line 3)
- ‘checking’ against ‘check’ (5:4)
- ‘prepare’ instead of ‘cook’ (5:6)
- ‘dry cleaner’ instead of ‘washman’ (5:7)
- ‘government’ for ‘goment’ (5:7)
- ‘sanitation exercise’ against ‘clean up’ (16:6)
- ‘special treatment’ instead of ‘beta service’ (9:7)
- Etc.

This feature has been viewed by some authors as a movement towards creolisation of the NP.

Semantics deals with the relationship between linguistic forms and meaning in a natural language. Often poets employ satire (attack on foolish behaviour by making fun of it), and irony (expression of meaning by saying the direct opposite of what is intended) in an attempt to convey meaning. Such devices enable the poet to mildly make his/her point without necessarily hurting feelings. It is quite obvious in our text that the poet has utilized satire and irony to criticize the excesses of the Nigerian governments, especially the military government at the time of his writing. The following stanza (18) is quite satirical:

I wan bi President  
 Wey dem go dey praise  
 Every street go carry my name  
 I go rename all University for de country  
 All de towns go carry my name  
 If dem publish newspaper or magazine  
 Wey curse me even small  
 Na bomb I go take teach them lesson  
 ...

Notice the allusion in the last line to the death of the Nigerian journalist, Dele Giwa, who was killed by a mail bomb in his Lagos home on October 19, 1986 for his indicting publication against the government. It was believed that the then military president masterminded his death. The poet has therefore condemned the action using satire. It is also ironical that the poet whose duty it is to guide and correct, should desire to be a bad president like the one described. Other instances of the use of satire and irony run throughout the text.

**Hyponymy**, which is a semantic relationship between words referring to entities of the same class, also feature in the text. In hyponymy, the word with a most general meaning is called the superordinate term, while other terms with more specific meanings belonging to the class of the superordinate term are called hyponyms (Udofot, 34). Thus, in the text, stanza (19) features ‘plenty titles’ as the superordinate term under which the following hyponyms belong: ‘de Excellency’, ‘Commander-in-Chief’, ‘Field Marshal and Admiral’, ‘Lion of de Niger’, ‘Grand Commander of de nation’, ‘snake wey get forest’. The poet has employed hyponymy to highlight the so much importance which the ‘President’ attached to titles.

Some figurative elements that feature in the text include: simile, metaphor and hyperbole.

**Simile** describes indirect comparison between two things by the use of ‘like’ or ‘as’ as connector. Examples:

Dey look like person wey no see food chop (11:4)  
Wey dey kill person like dem bi flies (11:9),  
Wey don fat like person wey dey fattening room (11:14),  
etc.

**Metaphor** compares two dissimilar things in a striking way without the use of connectors. Instances in the text include:

Na bullet you go see chop one time (11:12)  
Na bomb I go take teach dem lesson (18: 8)  
Dem go address me as snake wey get forest (19:8).

**Hyperbole** means exaggerated statement made for special effect. Instances in the text include:

Dem go close even air too (7:2)  
Na president get country (7:8)  
If you cough every country go begin cry (13:2)  
If you cough every country go begin weep (13:4)  
All de towns go carry my name (18:5)  
Etc.

The above figures of speech present a mental picture to the reader thereby appealing to his/her imagination. The result is better participation. Beyond that, the presence of the figurative devices in the text is a proof that NP is adequately resourceful to operate in poetry like Standard English.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The objective of this study has been to demonstrate the resourcefulness of Nigerian Pidgin to operate effectively in poetry in the context of an already established medium (Standard English). To this end linguistic stylistics was deployed in a detailed analysis of "I Wan bi President," a Nigerian Pidgin poem by the late Ezenwa-Ohaeto, in order to make explicit the linguistic-creative resources that lent NP its viability in the novel domain.

The study revealed that all stylistic dimensions: graphological, syntactic, phonological (or sound), and lexico-semantic resources, possible with poetry in Standard English are equally possible with poetry in NP. This seems to equate the two language varieties in their proficiency as communication vehicles in poetry. But the grammatical structures of NP as the text revealed are relatively more simplified, making the language accessible to all categories of people; of course the availability of literary experience depends largely on the accessibility of the language of its creation, and this has more relevance to poetry which some people dismiss as inaccessible. Moreover, writers (poets in particular), are generally more *laizzer-faire* and less pedantic in the use of NP, which allows them full exploitation of the poetic license. This, added to the graphic, descriptive and comic facilities of the language, enables poets to elaborate serious themes in an equally entertaining style.

There is no doubt therefore, that Ezenwa-Ohaeto has successfully exploited the resources of the NP through the use of 'folk poetics and a sensitive deployment of a range of rhetorical styles while synthesizing formal features of poetry and verbal resources to generate a new vigor in the Nigerian poetic tradition' (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 77).

Two major points often held against NP are: (1) its numerous varieties; (2) inconsistency in its writing system. However, the first point has been defeated by the revelation that all varieties of Nigerian pidgin are mutually intelligible though with a little adjustment and that NP is even (almost entirely) mutually intelligible with other West African pidgins (Elugbe, 299). The second point is still a reality but a harmless one because despite its existence, there is no doubt that NP has continued to grow in use, status and acceptance. This trend is evident in its function in Nigerian poetry, and the language has proved viable in this novel creative domain. It is hoped that the trend will continue, and that through borrowing from both English and indigenous Nigerian

languages, the vocabulary of Nigerian Pidgin would be expanded and its writing system may ultimately acquire a stable tradition.

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