



Juggling Words, Playing Sages: Proverbs and Wise Sayings in Ghanaian Student Pidgin

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Abstract: Proverbs and wise sayings in most cultures, though grounded in anonymity and communal authorship, have often been ascribed to sagacious old people from antiquity. Most studies on Ghanaian pidgin, a fast emerging area of scholarship, particularly Student Pidgin (SP), focus mainly on vocabulary, syntax and grammar, among other features. However, there is a growing body of proverbs in SP discourse which is not attracting interest among linguistic scholars and discourse analysts. This study fills the gap by presenting a sizeable corpus of SP proverbs and wise sayings which are analysed in the sociolinguistic domains in which they are generated, the diverse communication contexts in which they are deployed, taking into account their linguistic and literary qualities. The outcomes show that most of the proverbs are based on existing ones, allude to specific persons and phenomena while maintaining their uniqueness through the contexts of use. We then call for attention to this aspect of SP.

Key words: student pidgin, proverbs, contexts, discourse, implication.

1. Introduction

Student Pidgin (SP), or Youth Pidgin (used interchangeably in this study), in Ghana is a complex and hybrid phenomenon. It cross-cuts the variety of pidgin used by educated people, and is categorized variously as “Argot” (Tandoh 1987), “Harvard” (Hyde 1991), “Hybridized English in Ghana” (Ahulu 1995), “Student Argot SA” (Forson 1996) and “Student Pidgin (SP)” (Dako 1999, 2002, 2003). These researchers regard Student Pidgin as educated Pidgin English and the code is essentially a male-dominated one used for informal discourse by students (Dako 1999, 2002; Forson 1996, 2006; Nettey 2001; Tawiah

1998; Henaku 2010; Guerini 2006 etc.). Dako (2012:53) describes it as the pidgin “which is spoken by male university students in Ghana’s [...] universities and used exclusively for their out-of-classroom communicative need.” In terms of its linguistic composition and use as either a lingua franca or an idiolect, Forson (2008:83) explains that:

The various linguistic groupings [in Ghana] maintain functional relationships, i.e. between the lingua francas and the other local languages on the one hand and the indigenous languages and the non-indigenous languages on the other. In this relationship, Akan, an indigenous language,

and English, a foreign language, have assumed strong positions as lingua francas in Ghana while Students' Pidgin English—SPE—is emerging as a strong code among the youth, especially those in secondary schools and the universities.

The influence of Twi (an Akan dialect) on pidgin and creoles has also been noted by Mittelsdorf (1979), Alleyne (1980) and Schneider (1993) among other scholars.

With regard to Forson's assertion that SP is employed mostly by students in secondary schools and university campuses, we are of the view that, practically, SP functions in a diverse mix of domains and environments. So long as students and those who constitute the youth bracket continue to socialize and interact, and consider themselves as products of shared experiences and worldview, their distinct hybrid language will continue to be their medium of discourse wherever they find themselves; of course, outside formal environments such as classrooms and workplaces. As Guerini (2006) rightly points out, it is a kind of "language alternation" and a strategy that allows students to exclude outsiders, especially females.

Huber (1995), Dako (2002), Forson (1996; 2006), Singler (1979), Mittelsdorf (1979) and others have delved into the morphology and syntax of Ghanaian/West African pidgins and diasporic creoles and

have drawn attention to "Africanisms" in grammatical structures. Mittelsdorf (1979: 8) defines lexical Africanisms as:

- i. full morphemic retentions;
- ii. hybrids;
- iii. semantic shifts
- iv. calques and
- v. word-formation devices.

Some of these characteristics, where they do occur, are identified and analysed in the text. This paper is organized thus: there is an introductory exposition on the topic, a methodological outline, sampling of the proverbs/wise sayings and an analysis of the sample. The literary and linguistic peculiarities of the sample are also discussed in line with their syntactic phrasing and patterning, semantic extension, assonance, comparisons and allusions. The paper concludes with a call on language researchers to probe other aspects of youth pidgin proverbs.

2. Data Collection and Methodology

The proverbs and wise sayings used in this study were collected in 2010 through listening to and interacting with students, mainly on the University of Ghana campus. Students were also interviewed for the purposes of eliciting interpretations and explanations regarding meaning and contexts. It must be stated that since the code is mostly a male-dominated one, only male students were selected. In terms of analysis, the proverbs were

loosely translated, or transliterated, into English, and scrutinized under

- i. meaning
- ii. context
- iii. implication
- iv. observation

Finally, the proverbs were subjected to literary and linguistic analysis, taking into consideration the fact that proverbs, as verbal art, are rich in imagery and peculiar linguistic nuances.

3. Samples of Proverbs / Wise

Sayings

1. If the Queen of England *gbaa*,
ibe new word for dictionary inside.

[if DET Queen of England breaks,
it is new word for dictionary inside]

*If the Queen of England breaks
(an English word), it is a new
word in the dictionary.*

Meaning: If the Queen of England makes a grammatical mistake, it becomes a neologism and finds immediate acceptability.

Context: There are three contending angles to the context in which the proverb is used. All three have implications of power relationships, infallibility/fallibility and postcoloniality. The Queen of England is conceived of as superintending everything English and is therefore regarded as the final authority in the use of the English language, bearing in mind that English usage at its most exquisite, especially in terms of Received Pronunciation (RP), is often described as the “Queen’s English”.

Implication: (a) The Queen of England is infallible as far as English usage is concerned.

(b) The Queen of England is fallible after all, as far as English usage is concerned.

(c) The postcolonial subjects look up to the former colonizer, especially with regard to the use of English; regardless of the prevalence of regional varieties of English worldwide.

Observation: The key word in the proverb above, which is code-mixed with English, is the verb “gba.” Interestingly, the word means “break” in both Ewe and Ga. In both languages, among the youth, a grammatical mistake, or any infelicity in the use of English (malapropism, bad grammar, mispronunciation etc.), is described as, literally, “breaking” English: “break”: in Ewe and “tear” in Ga. Thus, among Ewe youth, “Egbã ze” (He has broken a pot) means: “He has committed a grammatical mistake”. Similarly in Ga, “Wo gba” literally means “You have torn (English into pieces)”. This supports the second interpretation above, in which case the Queen “breaks” the English language (as in “Broken English,” which is another designation for pidgin in Ghana). Thus, the Queen is seen as incompetent in her own language, a language of which she is supposed to be an embodiment. It also means that any time the Queen opens her mouth or utters a word, rightly or wrongly, it automatically becomes an English word; and the fact that it will appear in an English “dictionary” means,

indeed, the Queen is regarded as the chief custodian of the language.

2. Ntɔkwa no get formula.
[fight no get formula]
Fight has no formula.

Meaning: There is no formula for fighting.

Context: Survival—when one is engaged in a fight, especially with a bigger or stronger opponent, one can adopt any tactics.

Implication: Finesse or decorum is a luxury when one is caught in a life or death situation; there is no orthodoxy or established rule of engagement; every available weapon or means is permissible.

Observation: Another case of code-mixing in the construction of youth pidgin proverbs. Firstly, the proverb is built around the Twi word “ntɔkwa”, meaning “fight.” Secondly, it draws on the English idiom, “to fight tooth and nail.”

3. Non-brɛ-get dey come plus im consequences.
[NEG-tired-get ASP come plus its consequences]

Getting-without-tiring comes with its consequences.

Meaning: There are dire consequences for things that are attained without much effort.

Context: An exhortation for hard work and diligence.

Implication: The harder one works in achieving something, the more rewarding it is.

Observation: As in examples (1) and (2) above, this proverb also combines Twi (“brɛ”) and pidgin. Even more interesting is the hybrid compounding involving “non”

(English negative marker) + “brɛ” (Twi word for ‘tire’) + the English word “get”. Also, like example (2) above, this proverb draws on two well-known English proverbs: (a) “Easy come, easy go”; (b) “No pain, no gain”.

4. God i-no be lefty, wey you go swerve am for im right hand side.

[God PRO-NEG BE left-handed, that you go swerve PRO for PRO right hand side]

God is not left-handed, such that you can swerve Him on the right hand side.

Meaning: God watches what every individual does; nothing is hidden from God.

Context: Invoked when someone acts in a manner that portrays that God can be taken for granted, or deceived (“swerved”). Note that the word “swerved” is derived from football terminology used in Ghana as a synonym for “dribble”. The proverb is close to the English adage, “You can run, but you can’t hide.”

Implication: God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.

Observation: Draws on youth delinquency or truancy, and, therefore, a reminder that, in the long run, one’s escapades in the dark will surely come to light. Or, better still, “the long arm of the law” will catch up with one.

5. Miss World sef, if she sick wey she go hospital, she dey commot im ass

[Miss World even, if she sick and she go hospital, she ASP remove PRO buttocks]

make doctor give am
injection.

make doctor give PRO
injection]

*Even Miss World bares her
buttocks for the doctor to inject
her when she falls sick and goes
to hospital.*

Meaning: Miss World, despite her beauty, fame and international image, is a mortal being after all, and must do as others do when they go to hospital—strips herself naked (“commot im ass”) when it comes to injecting her.

Context: This proverb, among the youth, is used to deflate the inflated egos people, especially young beautiful girls who are either arrogant, too self-conscious of their beauty or act as if they are super-humans. It is also used with regard to girls who play hard to get.

Implication: Under certain circumstances, nature has a way of leveling all human beings—the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the beautiful and the ugly etc.

Observation: It has been noted that this particular proverb is used with much flexibility, in that “Miss World” is used interchangeably with any internationally acclaimed beautiful woman or female celebrity (the Rihannas, Beyoncés, Madonnas, Kardashians, Michelle Obamas etc.), all of whom, for all intents and purposes, are youth role models or popular media and cultural icons.

6. Cunt, them no dey iron am
before them dey chop am.

[Cunt, PRO NEG ASP iron
PRO before PRO ASP eat
PRO]

*Cunt (vagina), they don’t iron
it before they eat it.*

Meaning: One does not waste time beautifying a woman’s private part before sexual intercourse.

Context: Courtship, but could be extended to situations where either choice is limited, or one needs to act with dispatch.

Implication: In matters of courtship and sex, there is no dilly-dallying or lukewarm approach.

Observation: Obscenity and profanity are “accepted” features of many verbal, musical or linguistic art forms in some African cultures. The view is held that art prescribes polite ways for saying impolite things; it provides ways for expressing the inexpressible (Devereux 1971; Meriam 1964; Avorgbedor 1990). In music, for instance, the song “removes normal and immediate responsibilities from the singer, and consequently leaves the singer blameless because of the ontological exemplification of the artistic phenomenon which is beyond functional analysis” (Avorgbedor 1990: 223-4). It also has to be emphasized that, naturally, amongst themselves, the youth are more likely to be less inhibited in their use of vulgarism in proverbs. However, the use of “cunt”, which is an informal word for the female genital, acts as a kind of euphemism and tempers the severity of its profanity. The proverb may also be a parody of the English

proverbs, (a) “Make hay while the sun shines,” or (b) “Time and tide wait for no man”.

7. If you buy Ga kenkey, you for claim red pepper.

[If you buy Ga kenkey (type of cornmeal), you must claim red pepper]

If you buy Ga kenkey, you must collect red pepper (sauce).

Meaning: Ga kenkey is usually eaten with pepper sauce.

Implication: If you embark on any endeavour, be sure to assemble all the necessary requirements and resources.

Context: A reminder that in all circumstances one must endeavour to go the full haul. Things must not be done haphazardly.

Observation: Close to the English proverbs (a) “Drink deep or don’t taste at all” and (b) “Things done by halves are never done well.”

8. Akpeteshie-oo, Guinness-oo, we all we booze pɛpɛɛ.

[Akpeteshie (locally distilled alcohol), Guinness, we all we drunk equally]

Whether “akpeteshie”, or Guinness, we are all equally drunk.

Meaning: Akpeteshie is an intoxicant just like Guinness.

Implication: Individuals have a choice with regard to what they can afford and what they think is good for them.

Context: Used to deflate elitism; or invoked as an act of defiance, nonconformity or going for broke.

Observation: Among Ghanaian students, especially university ones,

there is an obsession with “standards”—refinement, bordering on elitism. Consequently, things considered crude, unrefined or cheap, are associated with people from the countryside. One of such things is the local gin, “akpeteshie”, the distillation, sale and consumption of which were prohibited during the colonial era. However, no matter its crudity, its potency as an alcoholic beverage or intoxicant is never in question; hence whether one drinks “akpeteshie” or the more “refined” Guinness (stout lager), the effect is the same.

9. You go fit force horse make i-go classroom, but you no go fit force am make [PRO go fit force horse make PRO-go classroom, but you NEG go fit force PRO make im learn one-plus-one. PRO learn one-plus-one]

You can force a horse to go to the classroom, but you can’t force it to learn one-plus-one.

Meaning: There is a limit to what you can force people to do.

Context: Often used in situations where people are encouraged to rebel against constituted authority, or any person who wants to coerce people into doing things against their will.

Implication: It is important to respect people and desist from inflicting or imposing choices on them.

Observation: Based almost entirely on the English proverb, “You can take a horse to the stream, but you can’t force it to drink”. Generated in an academic environment, it is only natural that the lexical items have

been altered to suit that environment; hence the need to substitute “stream” for “classroom”.

10. Wanti-wanti no get, geti-geti no want.

[Want-want NEG get, get-get NEG want]

Those who want (some vital things) don't always get them; those who have (some vital things) don't want them.

Meaning: It is not everything that one desires that s/he gets and it is not everything one gets that s/he needs.

Context: When people become too desperate and too ambitious about possessing something.

Implication: One should live within his/her limits and must not grab everything that comes his/her way.

Observation: There are several proverbs in Ghanaian languages that caution against excessive or obsessive desire to acquire certain things. This youth pidgin proverb might be based on these traditional proverbs.

11. Soja go, police come.

[Soldier goes, police comes]

Whenever a soldier leaves a police replaces him/her.

Meaning: Authority has many faces, if one is not present at a time, another will.

Context: One should always be careful as one does not know who is watching.

Implication: Caution should always be the watchword in whatever one does. Someone might be watching.

Observation: Both soldiers and the police are security personnel although they wear different uniforms. They both work towards one main goal and not against the goals of each other.

12. Einstein get moustache, Osama too get moustache, but Osama no know quantum physics.
[Einstein get moustache, Osama too get moustache, but Osama NEG know quantum physics]
Einstein gets (has) moustache, Osama too gets (has) moustache, but Osama doesn't know quantum physics.

Meaning: Everyone has their unique specializations/talents/qualities.

Context: No one should underrate the other because everyone is special.

Implication: One should not examine a person just based on outward appearance. Both Albert Einstein and Osama bin Laden might physically look similar but their inner qualities are different. One should judge people without comparing them to others.

Observation: This proverb might be another rendition of the saying that “appearance is deceptive”.

13. The day exam koti barb your footnotes, dat be the day your A-plus go turn Z-minus.

[DET day exam “koti” barb your footnotes, that BE DET day your A-plus ASP turn Z-minus]

The day exam invigilator barbs your footnotes, that's the day

your A-plus will turn to Z-minus.

Meaning: The day the exam invigilator / supervisor catches you with prepared notes in the exam hall, that will be the day your A-plus will turn to Z-minus (your paper will be cancelled).

Implication: You cannot outwit an exam invigilator forever; one day you will be caught and be ruthlessly punished.

Context: As a warning to exam cheats—students who smuggle prepared material / notes into the exam room—that the long arm of the law will surely catch up with them.

Observation: This wise saying lies directly within the domain of youth / student experience as far as examinations are concerned.

14. Them say Romeo must die; if you roam too much, you go die.

[PRO say Romeo must die; if you roam too much, you ASP die]

They say Romeo must die; if you roam too much you will die.

Meaning: If you roam too much you will die.

Implication: There is danger in over-indulgence; one should learn from the predicament of Romeo.

Context: Used in situations where the youth tend to be overly adventurous.

Observation: The “Romeo” in the proverb has only an indirect relation to Shakespeare’s Romeo in the youth romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead, it is an ironical reference to the US-produced action movie *Romeo Must Die* (2000), featuring Jet Li, which transposes elements

from Shakespeare’s play to the US West Coast of the present. However, there is definitely no conceptual relationship between “Romeo” and “roam”. (This will be explored further in the next segment of the discussion.)

4. Literary and Linguistic Peculiarity of SP Proverbs / Wise Sayings

SP proverbs and wise sayings exhibit similar characteristics associated with proverbs in the indigenous Ghanaian or African languages. John Mbiti (1997) notes that proverbs have a rich vocabulary of words, phrases, combinations of words, symbols, pictures, allusions, associations and comparisons. Some of these features listed above can be found in SP proverbs and wise sayings, and are discussed below.

4.1 Phrasing and Syntactic Patterning

The commonest syntactic features we have identified in this study appear to be structures of complementarity, particularly parallelism, balancing, antithesis and dualism in syntactic patterning. Often, the proverb or wise saying is split into two, with the second part acting either as a complement or an antithesis to the first part. Consider the examples below:

- a). If you buy Ga kenkey, you for claim red pepper (balancing /complementation).
- b). Akpeteshie-oo, Guinness-oo, we all we booze pepere

- (balancing/
complementation).
- c). You go fit force horse make
igo classroom, but you no
go fit force am make im
learn one-plus-one
(antithesis).
- d). Wanti-wanti no get, geti-
geti no want
(balancing/antithesis).
- e). Soja go, police come
(balancing/antithesis).
- f). Einstein get moustache,
Osama too get moustache,
but Osama no know
quantum physics
(balancing/complementatio
n/antithesis).
- g). The day exam koti barb
your footnotes, dat be the
day your A-plus go turn Z-
minus
(balancing/antithesis).

4.2 Vocabulary: Semantic Shift/Extension

According to Schneider (1993: 209),

Three different types of sources have been suggested to explain the linguistic constituents of pidgin and creole languages: (1) the influence of an African substratum (Alleyne 1980; Baudet 1981); (2) universal principles (Bickerton 1981, 1986); and (3) elements from the lexifier language, or the superstratum which in most cases is European.

Although SP vocabulary thrives extensively on neologism, what pertains mostly in the data for this study is the practice of appropriating

existing English words and vesting them with new meanings and metaphors. The terms “exam koti,” “barb” and “footnotes,” placed in their proper student / youth context, capture students’ dexterity in shifting the semantic fields of English words.

- a). “exam koti”: stands for exam supervisor / invigilator, with emphasis on the noun “koti” which in ordinary Ghanaian parlance (not necessarily student / youth pidgin) means “police.” The word “koti” is from the Ewe “kpoti,” meaning club, baton or stick used by the colonial police for assault and crowd control. It may have lost its Ewe double articulation /kp/ when it seeped into the Akan linguistic domain because Akan does not have the consonant /kp/. The reference to exam invigilators as “koti” (police) means students have a certain antipathy towards, or fear of, invigilators, the same was as they relate to the police.
- b). “barb”: catch with a firm hold. The word is derived from “barbed wire.” The semantic import of substituting “catch” for “barb” is, denotatively, an approximation of the manner in which Ghanaian “koti” (police) (man)handle suspected criminals by securely restraining them in a vice-like clamp the way a barbed wire fence restrains burglars. Thus the richness of the term “barb” is the graphic picture it paints

of an exam cheat in the firm grips of an “exam koti.” Metaphorically, the hands of an “exam koti” or a policeman are likened to barbed wire.

- c). “footnotes”: (specialized in student / youth pidgin) refers to notes written on small pieces of paper and smuggled into examination halls for the purposes of cheating. Often, they are hidden in socks, hence the term “footnotes.” This is another example of semantic extension, where an English word is taken out of its conventional domain of usage into a new semantic field. We have to concede, though, that the conventional and subversive semantic fields are somehow related—footnotes are placed at the foot of a text, the way students’ “footnotes” are placed close to the soles of their feet.

4.3 Allusions, Associations and Comparisons

Allusions are a common feature in SP proverbs and wise sayings. These are captured in references to places, people and phenomena with which students are particularly connected. It is in this context that allusions are made to “the Queen of England,” “Miss World,” “Guinness,” “Akpeteshie,” “Einstein,” “Osama,” “quantum physics” etc.

4.4 Assonance

Rap music has heightened students’ interest in word-play, mainly internal

and end-rhymes and assonance. The item which best exemplifies it is:

Them say Romeo must die; if
you roam too much, you go die.

As indicated earlier, this proverb is a parody of the film *Romeo Must Die*. It is composed of two main clauses and one subordinate clause. The first main clause establishes a kind of syllogism—“Them say Romeo must die.” This is balanced by the subordinate clause “If you roam too much” and the second main clause “you go die.” Beyond this, the beauty and literary quality of this proverb lies in its play on words and sounds. The whole proverb is built around assonance, based on the words “Romeo” and “roam”—achieving thereby an artificial collocation between the two words (one a noun, the other a verb) to suggest, rather playfully, that a “Romeo” is one who “roams.”

In sum, it is important to stress that it is some of these features, particularly allusions, associations and comparisons (“Einstein,” “Osama” and “quantum physics”) that effectively distinguish SP from the mainstream Ghanaian Pidgin English (GPE). This distinction is emphasized by Dako who asserts that “Outside educational institutions, WAP or GhaPE plays a very minor role in Ghana’s linguistic repertoire” and “SP is a WAP and therefore a variety of GhaPE” (Dako 2002: 53).

5. Conclusion

Negative attitudes to SP (Egblewogbe 1992, Dolphyne 1995)

are on the wane. Indeed, “SP is today a stabilized pidgin” and “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” (Dako 2002: 61). From the discussions above, it is quite obvious that there is an emerging corpus of youth / student pidgin proverbs. These proverbs draw essentially on student / youth experiences and worldview. They exhibit a high level of sagacity and a keen sense of linguistic and verbal artistry. What has also crystallized is that, although English is the main frame in terms of lexicon, many of the proverbs are drawn from indigenous worldview, and languages, particularly Akan, which has become a de facto lingua franca in Ghana.

Linguistic elements from traditional folklore are essential parts of proverbs in most Ghanaian indigenous languages and the ability

to incorporate these, among other stylistic devices, into one’s utterance demonstrates one’s mastery of the language. The ability of users of SP proverbs to combine traditional folklore with current experiences reflects dynamic/creative nature of the users. It also shows that future experiences could be used to form SP proverbs: developing this speech style and bringing it abreast with modernity. In essence, what this study has demonstrated is a new approach to the study of witticisms, particularly proverbs, that demystifies speech acts as grounded in antiquity, worldview and folklore and therefore static. One must also add that, as far as language use is concerned in distinct speech communities in Africa, the line between tradition and modernity can sometimes be very faint, since the speech actors are products of both. An invitation is extended to language researchers to probe other aspects of youth pidgin proverbs.

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