

AFRICA

The BBC in Pidgin? People Like It Well-Well

By KIMIKO de FREYTAS-TAMURA DEC. 30, 2017

The headline on the article, published on the BBC's website, reads like this: "Woman wan troway poo-poo, come trap for window."

The piece, written in a form of West African Pidgin English, tells the story of a Tinder date gone horribly wrong: A woman in Britain found herself in a deeply embarrassing bind when the toilet in her date's apartment would not flush and she tried to throw the "evidence" ("di poo-poo") out the window. (You can read the details here, in British English.)

The offbeat anecdote tickled readers, not only for the story itself but even more so for its rendition in West African Pidgin English, an informal language that dates from the slave trade and that mixes English with West African languages. It was, according to the British tabloid *The Sun*, a "hilariously fresh take" on the date-from-hell story.

The "poo-poo" article, as it became known, was one of the most popular by the British broadcaster's renowned World Service, which recently added a dozen foreign language websites to its roster as part of efforts to capture a younger, more diverse and digitally savvy audience.

The expansion, the BBC's biggest since the 1940s, was funded by a British government grant of about 290 million pounds, or \$380 million. In addition to West African Pidgin English, the service now delivers news in **Afaan Oromo**, **Amharic**,

Tigrinya (languages spoken in Ethiopia, Eritrea and other parts of Africa); and in Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi and Telugu (spoken in India), among others. It plans to add the West African languages Igbo and Yoruba next year.

The BBC also has a website in Korean, and it broadcasts radio programs in Korean that can reach the reclusive state of North Korea, bringing the total number of languages it uses to more than 40. The media organization says it aims to reach 500 million people by its centenary in 2022, about twice the current figure.

“We’re reaching new audiences in a language that is popular,” said Bilkisu Labaran, who oversees the service in West African Pidgin and who grew up speaking it, in spite of her parents’ disapproval. In schools, teachers warned students about the dangers of what they considered a “deviant” language.

While Pidgin is looked down upon by some, the word itself is not derogatory. More than 75 million people are thought to speak the language, either as their primary or secondary tongue.

“It’s so expressive, it brings people together and reaffirms a shared African identity,” Ms. Labaran said.

There are many variants of pidgin spoken across West Africa, from Mauritania in the north to Nigeria and English-speaking parts of Cameroon in the south, and the BBC said it is using a *mélange* in an effort to create some sort of regional standard. This has fueled debates among staff members over word choices: should, for example, an article use a word from Cameroonian pidgin, or from Nigerian pidgin, the most widely spoken variant.

The team is also trying to pioneer a standardized written form of Pidgin, which is primarily a spoken language. There are no formal ways of learning it; people simply pick it up.

Chris Ewokor is helping the BBC effort by putting together a linguistic guide. “I’m creating rules that we never had before,” he said.

In Mr. Ewokor’s dictionary, “adrenaline,” for example, is translated to “power dey pump for im brain.” Drunken driving is translated as “drunkaman driving.”

Since the Pidgin service started in August, Bill Gates tried his hand at speaking the language in a BBC interview, where he responded to questions from Nigerians, many of whom speak a variant called Naija, or Nigerian Pidgin. (“Bill Gates: ‘Nigeria dey important,’ ” the headline on the BBC Pidgin site later read.) The British high commissioner to Nigeria, Paul Thomas Arkwright, also appeared in a BBC clip, speaking Pidgin rather fluently. (“I like Nigeria well-well,” he said.)

Pidgin does have its own grammar, phonetics and vocabulary, linguistic experts say, and it has historical and cultural significance in West Africa.

Dr. Christine I. Ofulue, an associate professor of linguistics at the National Open University of Nigeria, who specializes in Pidgin, says it reflects Africa’s relationship with outsiders over the centuries, evolving from the language of the slave trade to a form of resistance and anticolonialism.

Today, she says, it represents African pride, seen in the flourishing number of radio stations and television programs that use Pidgin. An opera sung in West African Pidgin was staged two years ago in London, a world first.

Pidgin helps bring together, at least linguistically, large parts of a continent carved up by European colonizers who were later replaced, in many cases, by corrupt leaders. “It’s the language of the masses,” Ms. Ofulue said.

She commended the BBC’s decision to offer the service, saying it helped remove the stigma attached to Pidgin, often derided as a corruption of standard English.

West African Pidgin has its origins in the 15th century, when Portuguese traders were the first Europeans to reach the western shores of Africa, looking for copper, ivory and pepper, as well as slaves. Vestiges of Portuguese remain — for example, “pequenho,” the Portuguese word for “small,” evolved into “pikin,” the Pidgin word for “child.” “Sabi,” the Pidgin word for “to know,” comes from the Portuguese verb “saber.”

Then came the British, who developed a more robust form of communication with local chieftains in the 17th and 18th centuries. At the time, Pidgin was regarded as a language for the local elite, who benefited from the slave trade of their own

people. In Nigeria, the largest former British colony in West Africa, Pidgin thrived as more and more people interacted with the colonizers.

As British English was introduced into schools in the region as a result of colonialism, Pidgin began to be viewed as a bastardization of the pure English that had been promoted with the help of institutions like the BBC.

But as time went on, Pidgin evolved into a language of resistance and anti-colonialism, embraced by activists like Fela Kuti, a firebrand Nigerian musician, who sang in Pidgin as an act of defiance. In “Gentleman,” for example, a song in which he attacks Western standards imposed on Africans, he sings: “I no be gentleman at all o, I be Africa man original.”

Even after West African nations gained independence, artists used Pidgin to criticize their leaders. In 2004, Nigeria’s president at the time, Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military general, banned a popular rap song, “Jaga Jaga,” (“Rubbish Rubbish”) about politicians who were “scatter scatter” (ruining) the country.

Although some critics discourage the use of pidgin, its supporters say it represents far more than a language.

“Young people are taking it and owning it, and creating an identity from it,” Ms. Ofulue said. “This is our creation. That pride belongs to us.”

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