

REVISITING THE GENDER DICHOTOMY IN GHANAIAN STUDENT PIDGIN: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF SINGLE-SEX VERSUS CO-ED HIGH SCHOOLS*

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ABSTRACT

Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP) has been used by students in various high schools (second cycle institutions/secondary institutions) in Ghana since the late 1960s. For so long, it has been considered a male-dominated language, which females did not or could not speak because of the negative perceptions people have of the language and those who speak it. This study, therefore, aimed to find out if females who attended co-ed institutions speak more pidgin than those in single-sex institutions. The results show that the type of school attended by the females does not have any significance on their use of GSP. While contributing to the body of literature on GSP, it also expands the conversation on gender dynamics in language use.

Key words: Ghanaian Student Pidgin, gender disparity, youth language, language and gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Ghanaian Student Pidgin (GSP) is seen as an offshoot of the older variety of pidgin in Ghana – i.e., the variety that has been referred to variably as *non-institutionalized/uneducated pidgin* (Huber, 1999) and *Town Pidgin* (Dako, 2002b), and which is largely regarded as spoken by the uneducated. Since this crossover, a number of theories have been offered to explain how a language which was previously associated with the uneducated crossed the educational barrier and came to be associated with students (and educational institutions). According to Dadzie (1985), GSP originated in the mid-1960s when schoolboys in coastal towns like Cape Coast started to use Town Pidgin because it was being used by sailors, who (due to their travels overseas) were considered trendsetters. In other words, the sailors came back from their overseas trips with knowledge of the newest trends and, consequently, these impressionable kids copied them from the way they walked to the way they talked. Dako (2002a), on the other hand, dates pidgin in high schools to the early 1970s and she says it started in the multilingual coastal schools, perhaps, as the students' way of protesting against the rule enforcing the use of only English in school. According to her:

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It would appear that [GSP] started out as an “anti-language” spoken by trend-setting urban boys. Interviews with men who were in school in those days reinforce the impression of “protest” in that quite a few associated the emergence of pidgin with the ban on speaking any Ghanaian language in school. A pidgin sound-alike was used instead of SE¹ with the argument, “You say we should speak English, but not what type of English we should speak.” (Dako, 2002a:75)

Osei-Tutu (2018) indicates that his own interviews conducted with participants who were in high school in the early 1970s appear to corroborate what both Dadzie (1985) and (Dako, 2002a) say about the genesis of GSP. He reports the following from one of his participants:

During that time, if you spoke pidgin, it showed that you... you felt that you were hip... yeah, you were a guy! It was some sort of fashion. Let say, for example, if someone came from Takoradi² and went to school in Cape Coast, when he came and he spoke the pidgin, you could see that he was hip. Yeah... it came from that area (Osei-Tutu, 2018:5).

That participant goes on to say that this individual was looked upon as a trendsetter or pacesetter and, before long, many of the students had learned pidgin from him. This comment, by the participant, certainly tracks with Dadzie’s (1985) remarks about why schoolboys found pidgin attractive.

Following from the above, one of the features peculiar to pidgin in Ghana (within the context of West African Pidgin) is the dichotomy between male and female speakers³ – almost all researchers show that both varieties are mainly spoken by males (for reasons that will be further explored in subsequent sections of this paper). Based on previous research (particularly, Huber 1999; Dako, 2000a; 2002b) which has established that GSP speakers typically pick up the code in school, our paper’s main interest is to attempt to explain the gender dichotomy by finding out if there is any correlation between female speakers and the type of high school they attended. We do this by answering the following questions: is there any correlation between female pidgin speakers and the type of high school they attended? Does the presence of male students in co-ed schools influence the usage of GSP by female students⁴? In order to answer these questions, though, we first verify whether the aforementioned gender⁵ disparity is reflected in our data. It is important to note, further, that in answering the above questions, our paper also contributes to the literature on the use of GSP. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we provide a brief background to the language of focus in the next few paragraphs and then review some of the relevant literature in Section 2. Next, in Section 3, we pose our research questions and outline the two hypotheses that

¹ Standard (Ghanaian) English.

² Another coastal town, Takoradi (approximately 50 miles west of Cape Coast) was the location of Ghana’s first harbour.

³ Our claim here is not that this dichotomy is unique to pidgin in Ghana (amongst all the languages in the world), but rather that none of the other pidgins and creoles within the sub-region (and to whom Ghanaian pidgin is related) exhibits this feature. Indeed, as our discussion section will show, we are aware that gendered use of language is well-documented.

⁴ As suggested by one reviewer, we would like to point out that determining the usage of GSP, fluency was not a factor. We are merely dealing with self-reporting of usage by respondents.

⁵ It is important to note that we use gender, here, as a binary term, i.e., a male/female distinction.

we test. In Section 4, we outline the methodology employed in the study and present the results of the data analysis in Section 5. Then, in Section 6, we discuss the relevance of the results in light of the research questions we pose. Section 7 then concludes the paper.

2. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Whatever its origins, GSP has now established itself as a major means of communication among students in high schools and tertiary educational institutions in the country, and as part of its growth, the speakers have sought to distinguish themselves and their version of the language from its parent language – in various areas of linguistic analysis – in an effort to avoid the stigma of no/low-education with which the speakers of Town Pidgin are tagged (Osei-Tutu, 2016; 2018; 2019; Osei-Tutu & Corum, 2014). The studies referenced in the preceding sentence have shown, for example, that the speakers of GSP have a considerably larger stock of vocabulary available to them than the speakers of Town Pidgin. This is because virtually all speakers of GSP are bilingual in a Ghanaian language and standard English, and, additionally, have no qualms appropriating whatever vocabulary items they need for use in GSP. Despite this desire to differentiate themselves, however, research (Dako 2002a; 2002b; 2013) still shows that GSP, like Town Pidgin, is a male-dominated language – a phenomenon which is peculiar to the pidgin spoken in Ghana. This peculiarity has been explained by previous authors, such as Dako (2002a) and Amoako (2011), as being the result of the historical context of its origin in the country and the perceptions surrounding the initial speakers. According to Dako (2002a), during its nascent stages in Ghana, pidgin was perceived as a language used mainly by soldiers and police officers – hence, the nickname, *Abongo Brɔfo* (the English of the barracks). She goes on to point out that another name for pidgin was *Kru Brɔfo* (Kru English) – with the Kru being a migrant people from Liberia who worked at the harbor and did other menial jobs. This is corroborated by Amoako (2011) who states that the other group of people who used the language outside the barracks were the Kru (who were immigrants from Liberia who took up positions as security in the south). What is notable about these two accounts is that the members of these groups (i.e., the soldiers, police and the Kru) were largely male. This, therefore, has led to the perception (in Ghana, at least) that Pidgin is a distinctively male language and females who speak it are viewed with disapproval – an idea which is further evidenced by this anecdote from Dako (2002a):

And I will finally mention the student who told us about a woman who came to one of the male halls of the University of Ghana looking for someone whose name she had forgotten. She spoke pidgin, and the students assumed she was a prostitute (p.74).

This stigma against female speakers is still very relevant as many studies conducted over the last two decades by researchers such as Forson (2006), Huber (1999), Dako (2002a; 2002b; 2013), and Rupp (2012) have reiterated the male dominance in the use of GSP. Some studies (Dako 2013; Adjei-Tuadzra, 2015), however, have also pointed out that more females are gradually using (or, at least, admitting to using) GSP. This study takes a slightly different approach to this issue that has been looked at by so many researchers. Our study seeks to answer the questions at the core of this reported trend of lack of female speakers of pidgin. So far, it is obvious that GSP is typically learned in high school and, consequently, it is safe to assume that girls in high school are also

exposed to the code. Additionally, as Dako (2019) points out, even the females who admit to speaking GSP mention that they picked it up from either a male friend or a brother and, until more recently, such female speakers did not speak GSP with other females. This situation raises the deeper issue of access to the code, which speaks to our second research question – in other words, will there be a significant difference with regard to the use of GSP between female students who attended co-ed high schools and those who attended same-sex institutions? However, in order to answer the question above, it is important that we first establish that our sample of the GSP speaking population also reflects this male dominance of the language – hence, our first research question which seeks to statistically ascertain this.

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Following from the discussion so far, this study seeks to show if it can be established statistically that there is a correlation between a person's gender and their use of GSP and, if so, whether any kind of relationship can be established between female speakers of GSP and the type of Senior High School (SHS) – i.e., whether same-sex or co-ed – they attended.

3.1. Research Questions

To achieve the aims stated above, we ask the following research questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between gender and the use of GSP?
- 2) What is the relationship between a female speaker's use of pidgin and the Senior High School (SHS) she attended?

3.2. Hypotheses

To answer the questions above, we make the following predictions. Firstly, based on the foregoing discussion, we predict that there will be a significant difference between the number of males and females, who speak GSP – with regard to our first research question (RQ1). Secondly, we also predict, with regard to the second research question (RQ2), that females who attended co-ed schools are more likely to speak pidgin than those who went to single-sex schools. The two hypotheses are presented below:

- 1) Hypothesis: relationship between gender and use of GSP
H₀: Speaking GSP is independent of gender
H₁: Speaking GSP is dependent on being male
- 2) Hypothesis 2: relationship between female use of GSP and type of school attended
H₀: The proportions of female students who speak GSP are the same irrespective of the type of institution they attended, H₀: P₁=P₂.
H₁: The proportions of female students who attended co-ed institutions and speak GSP should be greater than that of those who attended same-sex institutions, H₁:P₁>P₂.

4. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was derived from a Qualtrics survey designed to collect information on respondents’ experiences with pidgin in both junior and senior high school, as well as the university and beyond. The target population are young adults from Ghana who completed high school between 1994 and 2019. All participants are bilinguals who speak between two to five languages, including or in addition to English. The total population of individuals who took the survey was 353 (*N*=353). Out of the total population, the sample that was used to answer the research questions is 352 (*n*=352). This is because one participant did not state their sex. This information is presented below in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Frequency Distribution of Participants by Sex

		Sex		Valid	Cumulative
		Frequency	Percent	Percent	Percent
Valid	Male	220	62.3	62.5	62.5
	Female	132	37.4	37.5	100.0
	Total	352	99.7	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.3		
Total		353	100.0		

A noteworthy point in Table 1, above, is the disparity between the figures for male respondents and female respondents – i.e., the number of male respondents is nearly twice the number of female respondents. A possible explanation for this might be the stigma that has already been stated earlier in the text. In other words, even if it were assumed that there was an equal number of the population that attended high school, it is still possible that, given the disapproval associated with the speaking of pidgin, some female (speakers) would be hesitant to fill out a questionnaire investigating the use of the language, no matter the anonymity promised.

In addition to sex, two other variables were selected (as shown below in Table 2). The first was a question about whether the participants spoke GSP in high school or not (0=no, 1=yes) and the second sought information on the high schools the respondents attended with regard to whether the schools were co-ed or single-sex (0=co-ed, 1=single-sex) institutions.

TABLE 2
Selected Variables

Variable	Label	Code
Q23	Did you speak pidgin in senior high/secondary school?	1=yes 0= no
Q7.2	What type of secondary school did you attend	0=coed 1=single sex

In addition to the variables in Table 2, which were selected to aid the quantitative analysis, some open-ended questions were asked which provided qualitative data that will be used to explain

some of the results of the analysis. These, among others, included questions about why the respondents speak or do not speak pidgin, who they speak it to and how different people (such as, parents, teachers, colleagues, etc.) felt about them speaking pidgin.

5. RESULTS

With regard to the first hypothesis, the Chi-Squared test was employed to answer the research question on the relationship between gender and pidgin speaking. In order to use the test effectively, the relevant question was further split into two – the first part (a) focusing on finding out if there is an association between gender and pidgin speaking and the second part (b) examining the direction of that relationship (i.e., whether males speak more pidgin than female). With regard to the first point (i.e., (a)), the chi-squared test of independence was used to determine if there is an associated relationship between gender and pidgin speaking. Table 3, below, presents a crosstabulation of the two relevant variables – sex and the speaking of GSP in SHS, whereas Table 4 shows the results of the test.

TABLE 3

Crosstabulation of Sex by Use of GSP in SHS

		Sex * Did you (yourself) speak pidgin in Senior High School?		Total
		Did you (yourself) speak pidgin in Senior High/Secondary School?		
		Yes	No	
Sex	Male	167	53	220
	Female	37	94	131
Total		204	147	351

TABLE 4

Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	76.639 ^a	1	.000		
Continuity Correction ^b	74.693	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	78.402	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	76.421	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	351				

- a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 54.86.
- b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

The chi-squared test of independence, $X^2 (1) = 76.639, p < 0.001$, shows that there is a significant relationship or association between gender and pidgin speaking, since the p-value is less than 0.05. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis of independence and conclude that pidgin speaking is dependent on gender. Based on the outcome of the chi-square, which shows that speaking pidgin is dependent on gender, we need to find out if more males speak pidgin than females. Based on the observed count (male 167, female 37), males are more likely to speak pidgin than their female counterparts – which is consistent with previous research on pidgin in Ghana, as referenced in the initial sections of this paper, and establishes that our data is consistent with other scholars’ claims about pidgin in Ghana with regard to the gender dichotomy.

Following from the above, the second question that this study tries to answer is the relationship between females’ use of pidgin and the type of senior high school⁶ they attended (i.e., co-ed or single-sex). To answer this question, we used the SPSS filter tool to isolate the data on just the females and a chi-square test using Q23, and Q7.2 (see Table 2) was done. Table 5, below, shows the cross-tabulation information on females who attended co-ed and answered yes to speaking pidgin as well as females who went to single-sex institutions who spoke GSP.

TABLE 5

Crosstabulation of Females’ Use of GSP by Type of Institution Attended

Did you (yourself) speak pidgin in Senior High School? * Is the school Single-sex or mixed?		Is the school Single-sex or mixed		Total
		Single	Mixed	
Did you (yourself) speak pidgin in Senior High/Secondary School?	Yes	12	21	33
	No	40	51	91
Total		52	72	124

As can be seen from Table 5, above, the total number of females in this sample has reduced (to 124 from 131) because eight participants, including the one who did not identify their sex, did not state whether their school was co-ed or single-sex. Furthermore, the table shows that the count of females who attended a co-ed institution and speak pidgin is 21 which is about 29%. While the proportion of females who attended single-sex schools and speak pidgin is 12 which is about 23%.

⁶ As one reviewer pointed out, this assumes that every respondent attended one high school. This appears to be the case, per our data, as each respondent was required to indicate the name of the high school they attended as well as when they started and graduated from the school. All the respondents indicated only one school for the duration of their high school years.

Table 6, below, presents the results of the Chi-Squared test to determine the validity of the hypothesis.

TABLE 6
Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.573 ^a	1	.449		
Continuity Correction ^b	.304	1	.581		
Likelihood Ratio	.579	1	.447		
Fisher's Exact Test				.538	.292
Linear-by-Linear Association	.569	1	.451		
N of Valid Cases	124				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13.84.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

The results of the Pearson's Chi-Squared test indicate there is no significant association between the type of school females attended and speaking pidgin, $X^2(1, N=124) = .573, p > .05$. Since the p value is greater than .05, we fail to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that the number of females who attend co-ed institutions and speak pidgin is greater than those who attend single-sex institutions and speak pidgin. Actually, looking at the nearness of percentages, there is not even a trend in the expected direction such that female speakers from co-ed institutions are more likely to report having used GSP than female speakers from same-sex schools.

6. DISCUSSION

As we stated at the beginning, it is generally accepted that pidgin in Ghana is male-dominated so our first research question was intended to establish that this trend was indeed the case among our participants. It is not surprising, therefore, that the results of the chi-squared test of independence show that gender plays a significant role in who speaks GSP – more specifically, males speak the language more than females. A major reason why both males and females would not want to use GSP is highlighted in this statement by one of the participants: *It was a language for people who did menial jobs like garden boys, watchmen and night soil carriers. No educated person wanted to associate [sic] with that language. Teachers and the general populace frowned upon it*". To put it differently, whether male or female, the negative perceptions associated with the class of people who speak GSP, still affects its usage. As Dadzie (1985:116) explicitly states, "pidgins have from time immemorial been considered as sloppy, careless, or, at best bad dialects which are generally looked down upon by the speakers of, usually, the locally prestigious language". This perception

still holds even now⁷, in spite of increased scholarship on the study of GSP, not as “a stage in language acquisition, particularly second language acquisition, which functions as an auxiliary interlingua for communication between speakers of mutually unintelligible languages” (Dadzie, 1985:113), but as a language for in-group bonding, largely between males (Forson 2006; Huber 1999; Dako 2002a, 2002b; Rupp 2012). Again, as stated earlier, the stigma attached to pidgin is even more severe for females as evidenced by some of the responses given by the female participants. For example, some stated that *it was not ‘classy’ for females to speak pidgin*, while others expressed the desire to maintain and speak standard English and in order to be academically successful. Dadzie (1985:117) expresses this idea:

The desire to speak English like the English, which was carried on to a ridiculous extent and satirized by Kobina Sekyi (1974) in his play, *The Blinkards*, was very strong in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gold Coast.

What all these studies note about GSP, with regard to the male-female dichotomy is that there is an element of (what has been described in the literature as ‘covert prestige’) for the male speaker. This is emphasized in Dako & Bonnie (2014) who argue that, for the male speaker, GSP is a marker of having attained a certain level of formal education (i.e., high school and/or university).

Thus, our study confirms that the belief that pidgin has the reputation of affecting competency in English and general academic performance is still prevalent even though a number of studies (most notably, Amuzu & Asinyor, 2016) have shown that there is no empirical proof for this.

Again, as our results section shows, women who attended co-ed high schools were not found to be more likely to speak pidgin than those who attended single-sex institutions. We originally arrived at this hypothesis because of reports from previous studies that have shown that female speakers indicate that they learn GSP from males (e.g., friends or siblings). However, from the responses provided by the respondents, we find it reasonable to argue that the aforementioned stigma attached to the speaking of GSP makes it prohibitive for female students to speak the language. One reason for our argument is that it appears females in co-ed institutions are under pressure to conform to the societal views of how a ‘proper’ female should behave and this is evidenced by some participants indicating that they do not speak GSP because it is *unladylike*. As researchers in linguistic sexism and gender bias in language attest to, domains of language use, how the language is used and who is encouraged to use the language, is reflective of patriarchal power, gender discrimination and sexism that women face in society (Nyanta et. al, 2017; Menegatti & Rubini, 2017; Garnica, 2020). Thus, even though females in co-ed institutions may be more exposed to GSP (as used in the schools they attend), the sociolinguistic conditions are still such that they do not use the language significantly more than their counterparts in single-sex institutions. Indeed, based on the responses of the male respondents, it appears that even the male speakers disapprove of females speaking GSP. It is perhaps not surprising then that the participants of one of the major studies done on female use of GSP (i.e., Adjei-Tuadzra, 2015) were from a single-sex institution – Mawuko Girls SHS. The results of his study show that females are not only using the language but are also developing their own mechanisms and features. If GSP is examined through a Youth Language lens or simply considered as a language for group bonding, then gender

⁷ For example, much of the work being done on Haitian Creole by Michel Degraff is aimed at fighting this erroneous view.

stereotypes related to its use need to be re-examined. Perhaps, a paradigm shift in the perceptions of females who use GSP may engender more use by women and further the growth and development of GSP as exemplified in Adjei-Tuadzra's (2015) work.

7. CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study was to answer two main questions. It is clear from the results that gender still plays a very important role in the use of GSP in senior high secondary schools. Males are a lot more inclined to use the language for bonding and communication purposes; whereas females shy away from the language for reasons such as: a desire to maintain or improve proficiency in English, a desire to be academically successful, the lack of opportunities (and/or people) to speak it with, and perceptions about the level of competence. Additionally, our study provides evidence that there is no significant difference in GSP usage among females, whether they attended co-ed or single-sex institutions. It appears, therefore, that the factors (mentioned above) which account for female students' avoidance or lack of interest in using GSP are equally potent regardless of the type of school.

The broader implications of the findings for discourse on language and gender are also worth noting. As Eckert (2013) explains, gendered language use, gendered content and gendered linguistic resources emerge from everyday use founded within the cultural systems of a people. Thus, the gender dynamics of GSP use reflected in this study draws attention to the subordination of females in linguistic spaces that is indicative of societal perceptions of females. All the views expressed by the females in this study are symptomatic of societal male dominance in Ghana and in many parts of the world. This societal grounding is reiterated and discussed by many scholars. Lakoff (1973 cited in Hall et al., 2021) states that the place of women and the language they use is based on the patriarchal system of the society. Eckert (2013) reiterates that these views are not "benign but arise because of male dominance over women and persist in order to keep women subordinated to men" (p. 39). Additionally, Talbot (2019), explains that difference in language use between females and males (and as found in this study) is as a result of social attitudes about proper behavior of women and men. Thus, with the knowledge that contact with males does not increase the likelihood that female GSP speakers speak pidgin when comparing single-sex vs. co-ed high schools and the perspectives expressed by females on why they would not speak GSP, further studies should focus on GSP usage and how to address societal perceptions of females who use the language. It would also be worthwhile to expand the study to contribute to the discourse on the ways in which language and gender intersect with other dimensions of social life (Hall et al., 2021; Levon & Mendes, 2016) – working within the concept of intersectionality in GSP usage. Finally, further studies can also focus on whether there exist specific features of female GSP and male GSP that either support or reject the concept of female and male language dynamics.

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