Nigerian Pidgin vs. Tok Pisin: A Comparison of the Grammar
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Nigerian Pidgin vs. Tok Pisin:  
A Comparison of the Grammar

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1. Introduction

Nigeria and Papua New Guinea are two of many countries which have adopted English as their main language. But having so many other, substrate languages influencing the development of an English-speaking country, two major pidgin languages developed: Nigerian Pidgin and Tok Pisin.

If one wants to compare these two pidgins with each other, it seems almost inevitable to consider their great geographical distance as well as their historical differences. But my intent in this work is not to elaborate on the status and function and development of the two pidgins but on their differences in grammar. Therefore I’ll mainly focus on the noun phrase and the verb phrase.

2. Morphology

2.1. Plural marking on nouns in Tok Pisin

The majority of the English based Creole and Pidgin languages both at the Atlantic coast and the South Sea waive marking plurality on nouns or rather use it very optionally. Thus, the same applies to Nigerian Pidgin and Tok Pisin. But if there occurs the need to make a clear distinction between singular and plural both pidgins absolutely dispose of a pluralizer.

In Tok Pisin the most common way to express plurality is by the use of the particle \textit{ol}, which at the same time is identical to the third person plural pronoun. \textit{Ol}, clearly derived from the English ‘all’, occurs before the noun as opposed to the post-nominal English plural marking suffix \textit{-s}.

\begin{align*}
(1) \quad & \text{Mi lukim dok.} \quad \text{I saw the dog.} \\
(2) \quad & \text{Mi lukim \textit{ol} dok.} \quad \text{I saw the \textit{dogs}.}
\end{align*}

(Siegel)

But according to Geoff P. Smith (2002), “there is a great deal of variability, and the presence or absence of \textit{ol} is still somewhat unpredictable” (p 66). This can clearly be seen in the following example, in which only one noun takes the pre-nominal English plural marking suffix \textit{-s}.

\begin{align*}
(3) \quad & \text{Em i stap nau ma(ma) bl’ em wokim spia nau em i kam nau ma bl’ em wokim \textit{ol} bet.} \\
& \text{He stayed, his mother made \underline{arrows}, he came and his mother made \underline{beds}.}
\end{align*}