

Sociolinguistic and Political factors in Language and National Integration: A Case of Nigerian Pidgin

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ABSTRACT

Through an objective assessment of the sociolinguistic and political factors that should inform the choice of a suitable language to fill the gap of a lingua franca, this paper adds a voice to the call for the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin for this purpose. Previous suggestions for the adoption of one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) have generated ethnic and political sentiments. Nigerian English currently plays official and education roles and cannot be said to have effectively functioned as a lingua franca. It is the position of this paper that following Nigerian Pidgin's general acceptability (being used by majority of Nigerians), its de-tribalised and non-ethnic nature, as well as its function as a bridge between the educated and the non-educated; it is the most appropriate language for our national integration. The paper recommends the development of an indigenous sound based orthography, and official recognition of Nigerian Pidgin by policy makers, and the teaching of Nigerian English based pidgin to school children as their mother tongue as some of the ways of repositioning it to effectively play the linguistic role of a national language in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Language, National integration, Lingua franca, Nigerian pidgin.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a social construct that identifies its speakers. Nigeria with its current language situation that is characterized by multiplicity of languages used by the many different ethnic groups has no single language that its people can be identified with,

thereby making national integration a huge concern. Gumperz (1982) observes that language creates identity for its speakers and is also used to identify their social group membership. In the same view, every society's use of language is necessitated by the communication and interaction needs of its policies which oftentimes generated reactions both from within and outside linguistic circles (Opeibi, 2000, Edem 2015, 2020, Enang and Edem 2023). An example of such is when a society has many languages, yet has none that all her people can use and be identified with. There becomes a problem of inter language communication among users of the different languages that exist in a given society, thus creating the need for a lingua franca. Nigeria with an estimated population of about two hundred million people and 400 languages (Adegbija, 1997; Awobuluyi, 1998; Emenanjo, 2002; Oha, 2004, Edem 2015, 2019) is an example of such society where no single language can be called a unifying Nigerian language for national integration and social mobilization.

The language situation in Nigeria has thrown up a lot of challenges both to linguists and policy makers alike. These challenges include the determination of the exact number of languages spoken in Nigeria (as scholars have not yet agreed on the figure), the need for the development of the indigenous languages as well as the choice of the language that can bridge the communication gap that exist among the many different language communities in Nigeria (Edem 2015, 2019, Enang and Edem 2022). It does seem that of all these challenges, the choice of lingua franca is the most important and most controversial, if the language differences in Nigeria is to be appreciated. It is most important due to the need for people to have a common national language to meet the communication needs and most importantly because of the ethnic and political sentiments, suggestions towards a lingua franca have generated in Nigeria. Discussions on national language question in Nigeria have been a bit complex. Udofot (2008) observes that:

“The language question has been a thorny and much discussed one in Nigeria. The fact that the language question has become a genuine political and linguistic problem can be seen from the attention it has received and discussion it has generated in educational and linguistic circles.”

At present, English plays official language role in Nigeria, thanks to colonial imposition and education. As Edem (2019) observes,

Efforts to adopt it as the lingua franca have met with controversy as it has failed to effectively carry the communication burden of the half educated and non-educated Nigerians across the various ethnic groups. Proposals for one of the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), one of the minor languages or the creation

of an artificial languages from the three major languages to function as the lingua franca have all failed to yield any positive result.

Proposals have also been made for pidgin to play this role. Although this proposal has also generated criticisms, coupled with the fact that the government policies have failed to recognize it as a Nigerian language, it is the view of this paper that Nigerian Pidgin is the most suitable language for Nigeria's lingua franca. A study of Nigerian English based pidgin's origin, its growth and the review of the linguistic role it currently plays in solving the inter-ethnic and class communication needs will suffice to prove its appropriateness as a lingua franca in Nigeria. Edem (2016b) observes that there is Nigerian English variety seriously influenced by over 513 languages from the various ethnic nationalities that have come together like a jigsaw puzzle for the emergence of what is today referred to as Nigeria. Edem (2016b) urges that,

The Nigerian English is a nativized product of the socio-cultural milieu of the country...English language in Nigeria is used as a second language (L2) because it is a note one of the background languages of the people.

Similar sentiments are shared by Edem (2016b, 2018), Enang and Edem (2022) justify this exploration when he said that:

Among other functional loads that English carries are the means of communication between speakers of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds business transactions, keeping of administrative and official records of government, medium of instruction in our educational activities, etc. Unlike native speaker's environment where children in Nigeria...will only be taught English in the classroom, but will also "pick it up" as an optional compulsory course (Edem 2016b, p.135).

There is a link between the first language (L1) and the second language (English) in this context. The implication here is that there is the influence of the background language mother tongue L1 on the child's second language English (Udofot (2008), Edem 2015, 2016a, 2018, Enang and Edem 2022).

Edem (2015), Edem and Enang (2022), in different studies agree with the above exploration and further stress that, "where English is not the mother tongue, children (students) may have difficulties in trying to master English as a new language as a subject in school showing the advantages a first language learner enjoys against the learner of the same language as an L2 or second language speaker".

Lingua Franca and Language Policy in Nigeria

A lingua franca is a common language used by members of a given society that has many indigenous languages. It bridges the communication gap created by the multiplicity of languages in a given society. This is oftentimes mistaken for an official language. An official language is formal and used for government administration, education, judiciary etc. A lingua Franca can also be referred to as the national language to the extent that it is recognized by a policy as such (Edem 2019). An official language may be adopted as the lingua franca but this is not always the case (Jowitt, 1995, Eka 2000, Edem 2019, and Enang and Edem 2022). At present, English plays both official role and that of the lingua franca in Nigeria. While it effectively plays the official role, it is very doubtful if it has effectively played the lingua franca role except among the educated Nigerians.

According to Eka (1993), Edem (2019, 2020), debates on the choice of a Lingua Franca for Nigeria can be traced to the 1950's when suggestions were made for Hausa language to be used as the lingua franca. Much later, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba were equally suggested by the national assembly with none being accepted by Nigerians due to the ethnic and political implications of adopting any of the suggested languages. However, these three languages had already been favoured by the National language policy formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1982 and 2004 respectively (Udofot, 2008). According to Edem (2019), the policy confers on English the status of "the language of instruction from the fourth of a six-year primary course". One of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba is also recognized by the constitution as an additional official language. As far as the National Language Policy is concerned, the position of English is not being challenged. What is being challenged is the recognition of three languages to the detriment of others. The policy has however failed to solve the lingua franca question if the intention is to adopt one of the three languages. This policy also creates a problem for pupils from the minority ethnic groups in learning one of the three languages in addition to their mother tongues and English language (Edem 2015, 2018, 2019, Edem and Urujzian 2018).

The National Language Policy is flawed and has political implications. Although it is aimed at fostering national unity in Nigeria, but such national unity that imposes three major languages on speakers of minority languages, according to Oha (2004),

"...seem to be the kind of unity referred to by Emeka Odimegwu Ojukwu as the Unity of Jonah and the Whale... the majority ethnic beasts swallows the minority. Being in the belly of the beast would certainly not be a comfortable experience..." (p.283).

The feelings of marginalization and dominance perceived by the majority group languages as observed by Edem (2019) has created disunity, apprehension in the polity and social disorder among the component parts of the nation cannot be over emphasized. In terms of preservations of culture, Emenajo (2002) and Edem (2019) questioned how three languages become the media for preserving the culture of about 400 “autonomous people”. This is impossible, and makes it imperative for the adoption of a language that is neutral and spoken by all Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnic groups and indigenous languages. The only language in Nigeria that is characterized by such neutrality and is widely spoken is the Nigerian English based pidgin.

Nigeria Pidgin (NP) and Growth

Scholars are unanimous in their opinion that Nigerian Pidgin came into existence through the coastal areas (Elugbe 1995; Eka 2000, Egbokhare 2001, Edem 2019). Its popularity along the coastal areas of Warri (Delta State), Port Harcourt (Rivers State), Calabar (Cross River State) and Lagos give credence to such opinion. Ogu (1992) recorded that the Portuguese were the first to “set their foot on the West Coast of Africa”. Nigerian Pidgin (NP) started as a trade language with the Portuguese who had little knowledge of English, no knowledge of the coastal languages and adequate knowledge of the Portuguese. The mixture of these languages supposedly marked the early Nigerian Pidgin, which was perhaps aided by gestures and gesticulations. The coming of the English men who displaced the Portuguese, and later colonized Nigeria accelerated the growth of Nigerian Pidgin tremendously both syntactically and phonologically.

The earliest record of Nigeria Pidgin is arguably the surviving diary of events kept between 1785 and 1788 by Antera Duke of Calabar. Ford (1957) recorded in Awonusi (2004) considered the original form of the text in the diary as pidgin. However, Awonusi opines that the language is much more complex than today’s pidgin and views the extract as some form of sub-standard English. This paper accepts Awonusi’s position only to the extent of the complexity of the text as compared to the present Nigerian Pidgin. The paper agrees with Forde that the text is indeed in Nigerian Pidgin as it contains clear pidgin forms as indicated by the following examples.

Nigerian Pidgin forms

English meanings

Lok um (luk am)	-	look at it
E no send	-	he/she did not send
Full palaver	-	total trouble/problem

A text that contains such constructions among others can justifiably be regarded as Nigerian Pidgin. The word “palaver” is known to be of Portuguese origin and is used only in Nigerian Pidgin (not English) up to this day. The Nigerian Pidgin spoken now may have become relexified following inputs from Nigerian indigenous languages (Edem 2015, Edem 2019).

From this humble beginning, Nigerian Pidgin has grown in Nigeria and has spread like a wild fire in spite of the various linguistic challenges it has faced in the country. Although the existence of Nigerian Pidgin is not officially acknowledged by Nigeria’s policy makers, it is currently used for informal purposes at home, among children at play, as lingua franca among the uneducated or half educated (Osakwe, 2005; Ihemere, 2006; Edem 2018, 2019, Enang and Edem 2022). It is also used for formal discourse among the educated (Edem 2016). Its accelerated growth has been attributed mainly to the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria which creates the need for communication in urban areas. The process of urbanization has therefore greatly influenced its growth (Mafeni, 1971). With the creation of new States and Local Governments in the Country, more towns have sprung up and the existing ones have witnessed a high influx of people. Nigerian Pidgin, therefore plays a very important linguistic and communicative role to the youths. It is surprising how children in highly rated schools end up learning and speaking Nigerian Pidgin when the need arises despite their good command of English. Mafeni observes that the “fact that pidgin is for many town children a language of primary importance is not often appreciated”.

In Nigeria today, there is hardly a State where Nigerian Pidgin is not spoken at some level and by a given population. The population of speakers varies from State to State. Ihemere (2006) believes that Nigerian Pidgin has native speakers numbering about three to five million people. This figure is disputable and under estimated if the geographical spread of the use of Nigerian Pidgin is considered. It is used by the old, young, un-educated, half educated and informally by some educated Nigerians. The fact that Nigerian Pidgin is fast becoming a Creole and is functioning as a lingua franca in some areas such as Warri (in Delta State) suggests that this figure is very modest. The strategic nature of Lagos deserves a mention when growth of Nigerian English based pidgin is being discussed. Being the former capital of Nigeria until 1991 and the present commercial centre of Nigeria, the convergence of people of different languages become inevitable. This creates a problem of communication and a need

for a language of social interaction and trade. Nigerian Pidgin (NP), comes handy to play this role when participants in a discourse do not belong to the same linguistic group and cannot use English effectively as seen during political party campaigns or sensitization campaigns by the Federal Government, military or civilian (Edem, 2019).

Problems of Nigerian English Based Pidgin

Regardless of the tremendous growth, Nigerian Pidgin has made in Nigeria and the linguistic role it plays, it has also attracted criticisms. One main argument against it is its lack of standard orthography/codification. This has made its written forms to be riddled with inconsistencies as each writer of pidgin English adopts what he/she considers a correct spelling (Esizimotor, 2004, Urujzian 2018, Edem 2015).

Edem (2019) brings to the fore the concern in some quarters that Nigerian Pidgin is ‘bad English’ and considered an inferior or debased language. This feeling discourages people from using it in some environment. Many children of school age are discouraged by their parents and teachers from using it based on the belief that it will affect their learning of Standard Nigerian English. This attitude is perhaps a carry-over mentality from colonial period when it was discouraged due to its perceived negative effect on the teaching and learning of English language.

Another problem is its lack of official recognition as one of the languages in Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin is also not seen as belonging to any ethnic group. According to Elugbe (1995), Nigeria Pidgin English “does not have a constituency”. This sentiment is also shared by scholars, such as: Eka (2000) and Edem (2015, 2019). It becomes difficult to see Nigerian speakers who show concern that Nigerian Pidgin as a language is being marginalized as they would have, if it were to be their indigenous languages.

Nigerian English Based Pidgin as the Language of National Integration

In spite of its known challenges, Nigerian English based Pidgin continues to perform a lot of linguistic and communicative functions in Nigeria hence its suitability as a lingua franca. It has a detribalized nature since it has no ethnic affiliations. It plays functional roles across all classes of people (educated and non-educated) in Nigeria. It is purely a Nigerian language having evolved from its early days of emergence resulting from the need to communicate with the early Europeans. It is also the only language that can be used exclusively by Nigerians from different ethnic backgrounds especially in the presence of foreigners.

Although Nigerian English based pidgin is more popular along the coastal regions, its most important asset is that it extends the communication frontiers across all ethnic groups and even beyond the shores of Nigeria (Edem 2015, Eka 2000, Edem 2019). It can only be said to be owned by Nigerians. This suggests that the issues of ethnic sentiments or fear of domination will not arise if Nigerian Pidgin is officially recognized as the lingua franca in Nigeria. In addition, Nigerian Pidgin is the only language that can be used by other neighbouring West Africans (Francophone and Anglophone). This has been enhanced by regional trade coupled with the existence of pidgin and creoles in other West African regions, which are mutually intelligible. English would have been the other suitable language for this purpose because of its neutrality but it can only be used effectively by educated Nigerians and in a country where illiteracy has not been completely eradicated. Nigerian English based pidgin thus has an edge, as it is used by people irrespective of age, level of education, or mother tongue. In addition, English also cannot be spoken in the Francophone West African countries where Nigerian Pidgin is currently helping the regional integration and communication due to how easy it is to learn (Edem 2019).

In addition, with the exception of English, Nigerian Pidgin is more active than other languages in Nigeria. Some media houses have already started using Nigerian Pidgin in relaying news in Nigeria (Oha, 2004; Osakwe, 2005, Edem 2015, 2019). This can be observed in Edo, Delta, Lagos, Cross River and Rivers State. It is the language of informal communication among the youths, the uneducated and during social gatherings. It has become a creative tool in the hands of Nigerian artists. This comprises literary writers, musicians and recently stands up comedians. For instance, in literary circles, Aig-Imoukhede (1982) wrote his poetry collection titled 'Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead'. This attempt among others is a pointer that Nigerian Pidgin is very creative like other languages and can be employed effectively in creative writing. The music industry has witnessed a lot of creative use of Nigerian Pidgin by artists.

Ofolue (2004) noted that the late Fella Anikulapo-Kuti changed his medium of singing from Yoruba to Nigerian Pidgin and succeeded in appealing to a wider audience, which earned him more fans and contributed to his successful musical career. This was possible because many Nigerians understood him. Contemporary singers in Nigeria have adopted the same method. Such artists as *2face Idibia*, *Timaya* and *P-Square* are some of the new bread singers who have tapped from the creative nature of Nigerian English based Pidgin as reflected in their songs, some of which have earned them international recognitions and performances at international audience.

In spite of the lack of official pronouncement by the government on the status of Nigerian Pidgin, government agencies have constantly used NP in the dissemination of information, promotion and publicity of their programmes, information on voter's registration, election, immunization, HIV/AIDS awareness campaign, family planning etc. has been disseminated in Nigerian English based pidgin (Ofolue, 2004).

Some examples of such Nigerian English based Pidgin/ jingles are shown below:

Nigerian Pidgin Forms	English Meanings
A. <i>AIDS no dey show for fes</i>	AIDS does not show on the face
B. <i>If yu no no fit hol bodi, Kukuma yus kondom</i>	If you cannot control the urge, use Condom
C. <i>My broda, my sista beta don land o!</i>	My brother, my sister, welcome to bonanza
D. <i>Follow on other quickseller pay point Agents to dey make bata moni</i>	to able to get more money
E. <i>I dey lok up to you make u fix me up</i>	I am looking up to you so that you help me fulfill my dreams
F. <i>See those girls, even though nothing dey their body like my own, dem go vex if dem hear say I dey call dis kain price for you, dem go say I dey spoil market for them, but me, I just consider una.</i>	In spite of the fact that these girls are not as beautiful as I am, if they are aware that I am charging you so low for my services, I will be in trouble that I work against their corporate interest, I'm just doing you a favour
G. <i>See the way you dey price us, you think say na like dat dem talk, if no be say things hard I suppose don leave you enter room</i>	I'm surprised by the way you bargain price with us. If not that the cost of living is so high I could have abandoned you and proceed to my room.

Edem (2019) observes that the stigma that is hitherto attached to the use of Nigerian pidgin as an uneducated language has waned considering its role as an effective means of communication by the masses. Ofolue (2004) further observes that the office of the High Commissioner, United Nations (UN) has translated into pidgin the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Mass mobilization campaign among people of heterogeneous languages is better done in Nigeria using Nigerian Pidgin (Edem 2015b, 2019, Enang and Edem 2022, Edem and Effiong 2023). The elite and most politicians in spite of their social status in the society, readily switch over to Nigerian Pidgin during mass mobilization or political campaigns (Edem 2015b). This is to enable them get their information to reach the target audience and to identify with

them. For instance, during the 2007 general electioneering campaigns in Nigeria, the former president Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was reported to have carried out some of his party's campaigns in Nigerian Pidgin. One of the comments credited to him is the Nigerian Pidgin expression "*I dey kampe*" (meaning my position is assured).

In support of the proposal for Nigerian English based Pidgin to officially become the lingua franca in Nigeria and in recognition of the negative impression created in some quarters against it, this paper aligns with Fisherman's (1997) and Edem's (2019) assertion that no language is inferior to the other. All languages play the same role to the users. Nigerian Pidgin (NP), has risen to a dignified position (Abdulahi-Idiagbon, 2007) and this should be acknowledged by Nigerians. Bicketson (1983), cited in Wardhaugh (2006) declared that "it is better to focus on what pidgins and creoles have and do than on what they lack". By this statement, Bicketson, Edem (2019), and Enang and Edem (2022) recognizes the qualities a language possesses and the roles it plays.

Although theoretically speaking, no languages is linguistically minor, legitimate or bastardized, people tend to perceive Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as a corrupt, bastardized or lesser language (Igboanusi 2008; Marin 1996, Edem 2019). As pointed out by Elugbe and Omanior (1991) as cited in Akande and Salami (2010), attitudes to NP are not determined by any objective criteria. In spite of the fact that NP is used by more than two-thirds of the total population of Nigeria today (Faraclas 2004; Igboanusi 2008), the general attitudes of the majority Nigerians towards NP are still not encouraging. Concerning this, Deuber (2005) says,

Although a major lingua franca, it performs a growing range of functions, including, for example, that of a medium of public broadcasting, but no efforts have been made to develop it in order for it to be able to cope with these functions, as has been done for the major and to some extent also for minor indigenous language.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) cited in Akande and Salami (2010), Egbokhare (2003) and Edem (2019) suggest that NP be given the status of an official or national language while Igboanusi (2008) and Edem (2015) call for its use as a medium of instruction in the early stage of primary school education especially for NP – speaking children. One major argument of NP as a national language is that it is a neutral code as it has no ethnic based colouration. Igboanusi (2008) examines how NP could be empowered in Nigeria and remarks that education is the most important institution through which to raise the value of NP!

However, Igboanusi (2008) and Edem (2019) show that there is no consensus among Nigerians as to whether NP should be given any official or national status as some of them believe, among other things, that NP has no economic value.

Apart from the problems of orthography which admittedly are inconsistent, other arguments advanced against Nigerian English based Pidgin appears sentimental and subjective. For those who are afraid that Nigerian Pidgin might negatively affect the English language in Nigeria, such fear is unfounded. The two are different, and share no similarity except of course in the context of their origin in Nigeria. In addition, they have co-existed for a long time with other indigenous languages in Nigeria. Using Nigerian Pidgin as the lingua franca does not mean that English will be stripped of its functions in official quarters (education, administration, judiciary etc.), it simply means that the government will officially acknowledge its existence, work towards its development and allow it function without any hindrance in filling the communication gap of the citizenry and foster national unity, a function it has been performing unofficially and unacknowledged over the years.

CONCLUSION

One way of solving the National Language Question in Nigeria is for Nigerian English based pidgin to be given its official recognition by the authorities as a national language. In order to reposition it for the task ahead, certain actions should be taken. First and foremost, it is the standardization of its orthography. This will bring sanity into its written forms. It is a challenge for linguists to fashion out a uniform orthography for the language. One suggestion is to adopt an orthography that is entirely sound based. This is feasible because most English words in Nigerian Pidgin have been phonologically domesticated except when realized by a non-Nigerian Pidgin speaker. The use of the same indigenous spelling for both the superstrates and substrates seems appropriate.

In addition, Nigerian pidgin should be included as one of the languages taught to children of school age as mother tongue in all areas where it is already used as a creole and where teachers are available. This will strengthen the learning and use of its written forms as will be regularized. When these are done, it is expected that Nigerian Pidgin will function better as a language of national integration and promote the envisaged national unity and cultural identity of Nigeria, having shed off its old toga or poor rating as a bastardization of English or bad English.

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