



Still on the National Language Question: Can the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) Suffice?

Nneka Umera-Okeke[✉]
University of Port Harcourt

Abstract - Language among other factors has promoted the divide in Nigeria. Nigeria linguistic landscape is overwhelmingly multilingualistic with well over four hundred and fifty identified Babel of tongues. This has a concomitant implication for language question, national language policy and inter-ethnic communication problems in the country. Since the people have no common language, how can they mutually interact? How can Nigerians live in peace, unity and develop sustainably as one entity when none of the indigenous languages has emerged and cannot emerge as a common language? The thesis of this paper, therefore, is that the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) can serve as a National language in Nigeria because its usage transcends ethnicity, educational status and social limitations placed by the English language and our many indigenous tongues. It is against this backdrop that the paper highlighted the features that make Nigerian Pidgin (NP) a universal language devoid of ethnic affiliation, a language that can promote peaceful coexistence, unity and sustainable development, a language that can be trusted by all because as many indigenous languages as possible can act as the substrates and people will still understand and because English, understood by all, remains the lexifier (superstrum) language.

Key Words: Nationhood, identity, National language, substrate, superstrum, lexifier, Nigerian Pidgin

1. Introduction

Nigeria is one huge and complex multilingual community with several different languages used within the public and private social space from city to city. In the last twenty or thirty years however, the Nigerian Pidgin, otherwise known as Naijá has become one of the most important, most widely spread, and perhaps the most ethnically neutral lingua franca used in the country today. Current estimates show that around 5 million people speak Naijá as first language while over 75 million people use it as a second language in Nigeria and in Nigerian Diaspora communities in Europe, America and other parts of the world (Esizimotor & Egbokhare, n.d.).

There is a myriad of literature on NP. The NP evolved as a language of trade between Nigerians and Englishmen who had no language in common. Today, NP according to Elugbe (2015) has become stable and effectively used by Nigerians who hitherto had no language in common. It has metamorphosed into a language with structural, relatively simple, and recognizable characteristics. It is not a debased English or language, neither is it a broken English as erroneously conceived.

[✉] nneka.umeraokeke@uniport.edu.ng



Looking at the coverage of Pidgin in Nigeria, this paper is of the opinion that may be Pidgin could suffice as the National language since no agreement has ever been reached about which language will serve.

2. Concepts clarifications

2.1. Nation and Nationhood

People are said to belong to nation when they live together as one, sharing certain symbols. These symbols are the marks of national identity. National identity simply means belonging to one state or nation and some of the necessary symbols will include having a common flag, anthem, currency, myth/history, culture, food and of course language. Adeniji (2015) citing Benedict Anderson (n.d.) described a nation as “a community that is socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as being part of the group.” Adeniji further stated that:

a nation is essentially a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common languages, territory, economic life and psychological make-up; which is manifested in a common culture and behavioural patterns.

This definition has highlighted ingredients of a nation which are commonality of territory, language and behavioural pattern which enhance nation building. Adeniji further went on to describe Nation-building as

a deliberate process through which citizens and even inhabitants of any given territory, regardless of their primordial identities and affiliations are made to identify with the symbols and institutions of the state and share a common sense of destiny with others.

These attributes of a nation are currently deluding in Nigeria. Ethnicity, religion, bad and corrupt leadership and language divide us and there is always one threat or the other to Nigeria’s nationhood. Adeniji identified extreme politicking, ethnic sectionalism, destructive criticism and lack of national interests as contributors to Nigeria’s stunted national growth. If not Boko Haram, it is Fulani Herdsmen trying one ethnic cleansing or the other. In the face of all these, the government is helpless. The crux of this paper is to find out which language can unite Nigeria and Nigerians in the absence of a National Language.

2.2. Language and Nationhood

Studies have shown that language is one of the critical things that bind a nation together (Stokes 2017, Taylor 2017). It could therefore be said to be a mark of national identity. Language is very crucial and is easily identifiable and this goes



to portray the essence of a national language for many multilingual nations. According to Stokes, citing Pew Research Centre survey (Feb. 2017), “majorities in each of the 14 countries polled say it is very important to speak the native language to be considered a true member of the nation” (para. 1). Nigerian nationhood is at stake. Okoh (2006) has noted with dismay that “the prevailing situation of multilingualism obviously poses problems and challenges for the Nigerian nation” (p.44). This has incapacitated the efforts made by the nation towards choosing a national language in Nigeria. None of the indigenous languages has such potential capacity (for now) to dethrone English from the ‘linguistic palace’ it currently occupies and enjoys in the country.

According to Okoh, Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is one of the languages vying for attention in Nigeria or even... engaging in a contest to outrace or displace English as the country’s national language” (p.85). We at this point will examine why NP can be considered as a National Language in Nigeria.

3. Can NP serve as a national language?

This paper is of the opinion that NP can suffice as a National language in Nigeria. Although English still remains the country’s official language and the language of education in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba prominently feature as regional languages in the northern, eastern and western parts of the country respectively. Naijá as NP is sometimes called is widely spoken in many of the country’s big cities, among academic and non-academics of tertiary institutions, in military and para-military formations, in markets and even the sabon-gari areas of northern Nigeria. According to Okoh (2006), the language unites Nigerians of all ethnic cleavages or social colorations; making them down-play their apparent differences (p.108).

NP has bridged the communication gap between the educated and uneducated, the rich and the poor, high social class and low social class, one ethnic group and another different ethnic group, etc. The NP has engendered peaceful coexistence among people who are ethnically heterogeneous and reside together in places like Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, etc. In such areas for instance residents are from different educational, social, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Since they do not share equal educational background, it becomes a mark of illiteracy for *MR. A* for instance, who is highly educated to speak through his nose (in the name of Queen’s English) to *MR. B* who is not educated. In such a scenario, do you think there will be a mutual and friendly coexistence? Certainly such situation could breed dissension, discontent and disdain. Granted that English can unify people,



situations like this, seems to defy such unifying roles played by the English language. It is only NP that can offer what English cannot render at such material time. Okoh (2006) added that NP promotes peaceful coexistence “especially in the city where population is drawn from different parts of the Country” (p.104).

Furthermore, NP promotes peaceful coexistence in the area of marriage between people from different ethnic and linguistic background. Again, Okoh (2006) has explained that NP promotes peace and unity in the area of mixed marriages. NP “has achieved the status being the major or sole language in some homes’ (p.104). He further noted that NP

... Provides or remains the only solution to the communication barrier between people of not only divergent ethnic origins, but also differing social classes. This is in addition to being the true lingua franca in many homes, either by choice or default (p. 104).

Colleagues in the office use NP. Highly educated people even use it in informal occasions and sweet talk thus promoting group identity, rapport and affinity. Again, NP

....serves the crucial, even indispensable, role of linking people of divergent social and cultural backgrounds. Pidgin is employed in Nigeria by people of the same or differing social class or group, which also makes it the most popular and important medium of inter- ethnic communication (p.105).

Besides its inter-ethnic promotion of peace and unity, NP also encourages intra-ethnic communication which is a necessary condition for any sustainable development to thrive in Nigeria.

In the words of Simire (2005), NP is fast developing and nearing the most popular means of inter-group interaction in areas that are heterogeneous in the country. According to Jibril (1995), NP is now recognised ‘as a medium of easy communication with the masses’ (p.105). No doubt greater population of the masses use NP, be it at the motor-park, in the market, on the street and other public places. This explains why public servants and politicians use the language in order to reach the target audience. The reason for this being that NP usage transcends ethnicity, educational status and social limitations placed by the English language and our Babel indigenous tongues.

It could be remembered that all attempts to evolve a National language in Nigeria has failed. To be highly remembered was the attempt to do a combination of the three major languages in Nigeria that gave birth to “Wazobia”. How many of such marriages could be made? Adopting Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo has failed. Where this has failed, Pidgin made a mark.



Every pidgin is a hybrid of 'dominant' and 'dominated' languages which in language parlance are called superstrate and substrate languages respectively. Generally speaking, pidgin is used for contact and communication. According to Okoh (2006), NP is a product of contact between European traders and the multilingual coastal areas of Nigeria. As earlier noted, its emergence was necessitated by the need for communication among peoples of various background with different tongues who are original owners and native speakers of the progenitor languages who came into contact to trade goods and services. To meet the demands for the communication, the superstrate and the substrate language have to hybridised and the result? - A simplified and reduced language to facilitate contact and mutual communication namely, NP.

NP, Okoh (2006) explained, stands out as a language of its own as well as a true and worthy lingua franca in Nigeria. Some experts are in agreement on this. In language study, *superstrate* simply means the lexifier language while *substrate* language denotes the lexified language. Thus, NP has English as its superstrate language while Nigeria indigenous languages constitute the substrate. Besides the local languages, NP also borrows from foreign languages such as Dutch, French, Portuguese, etc.

Explaining the linguistic intercourse between the superstrate and substrate languages that gave birth to pidgin in Nigeria, Odumuh (1998) observed: "On this complex substratum of local indigenous languages was implanted a superstructure of foreign European languages" (p.2). This shades more light on the implantation of pidgin in the nation linguistic landscape. The local languages occupy the subsubstratum layer whereas the lexifier or superstrate language lies at the superstructure layer. With the current trend in the linguistic/political landscape in this country as well as the extent to which our indigenous (substrate) languages have made inroads into the NP vis-à-vis our nation's linguistic experience, it is no doubt that the NP will soon become a national language in Nigeria. Yes, it manifests a linguistic potency to function in that capacity.

Akin to 'species' of pidgin spoken world over, the NP is a product of different species of parent languages. Since many indigenous languages exist in Nigeria (which constitute NP substrates), the NP is bound to be influenced by the substrates. Hence, it borrows distinctively from both parent languages. Nigerian pidgin is open to a lot of influences from English (one of the superstrate languages) and local Nigerian languages (the substrate languages), especially from Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and the Edoid group of languages spoken in the Niger Delta (Esizimotor & Egbokhare, n.d.). Having established this, we shall give examples of



NP substrate languages to justify that pidgin is doggedly vying for 'linguistic royalty' and may possibly dethrone English to become Nigeria national language someday.

NP exists in various forms or varieties for example, the Warri pidgin which borrows from Urhobo, the Hausa pidgin which of course, borrows from the Hausa languages and dialects, the Port Harcourt pidgin which is a hybrid of different native languages in Rivers state, the Igbo variety, the Sapele pidgin, the Youraba variety, and other numerous varieties.

While much of the vocabulary of Naijá is derived from English its major lexifier, the rest of the vocabulary come from its other contributory languages such as Edo, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, as well as a significant contribution from Portuguese (Egbokhare, 2001). See the following examples.

Words from English

Chop	-	to eat/to consume
Domot	-	door mouth area
Doti	-	dirt
Pesin	-	someone
Trowe	-	throw away
Tok	-	to speak
Waka	-	to walk

Words from Edo

Kpangolo	-	container
Kpekere	-	plantain chips
Okada	-	motor-bike
Ororo	-	vegetable oil
Ozeba	-	a big problem

Words from Hausa

Dabaru	-	to destroy
Dogo	-	a tall person
Gworo	-	kola nut
Koboko	-	horse whip
Suya	-	spicy grilled meat
Wayo	-	tricks
Jara	-	extra

Words from Igbo

Akamu	-	corn starch /pap
Biko	-	please
Obodo	-	land/country



Okrika	-	second-handed item
Ogbanje	-	a water spirit
Ugu	-	pumpkin leaves
Words from Yoruba		
Adire	-	tie and dye
Agbo	-	herbal medicine
Ashawo	-	a prostitute
Shakara	-	show-off
Shey	-	hope or right?
Shele	-	happen/take place
Jaguda	-	a ruffian
Padi	-	friend
Words from Warri		
Bros	-	brother
Male	-	mother
Pale	-	father
<i>My kishi/kala</i>	-	my money
Words from Portuguese		
Palava	-	'trouble'
Pikin	-	'child'
Sabi	-	'to know'

4. Conclusion

This study has established that in Nigeria today that Pidgin could come to play when there is need for better understanding in discussions involving a wider society where the choice of the English Language as a medium may hinder audience participation. It connects people from all over the country and is available in all works of life. Although, English is definitely part of the African history, it can never be a symbol of the national identity in Nigeria. In contrast, the NP has developed and contains indigenous elements from the substrate languages, so that local people can identify and communicate with it.

It is therefore evident that the Naija has come to stay, and considering its wide range of function, neutrality and universality in use, it may be that which Nigerians yearn for in terms of a common language that can promote peace and unity in Nigeria. To make this process faster and successful, this paper would



therefore recommend that Naija be taught in schools, while books should be written in Pidgin, as well as used to address national issues and challenges.

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