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Nigerian Pidgin and the Quest for a National Language

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Abstract
This paper examines the candidature of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as a national language in Nigeria. A mixed method research design was used for the study. Questionnaire was given to fifty students from the faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to gauge their attitude towards Nigerian Pidgin as a national language. The study employs postcolonial theory to examine how the legacy of colonialism impacts the power dynamics of language use and subjugation and how it impacts people's attitudes and language policy decisions. The findings show that negative attitude towards Nigerian Pidgin is its most powerful setback. It is therefore suggested that government should institute a language planning agency for corpus and status planning for the standardization and acceptance of Nigerian Pidgin as a national language since it is the only indigenous ethnically neutral language in Nigeria and is therefore less likely to encounter the least resistance.
Key words: Pidgin, contact, creole, national, policy

Introduction
Nigerian Pidgin, like other pidgins all over the world arose from contact situations. It originated as a trade language between the Europeans and the riverine people of the Niger Delta region starting from the Portuguese in the 15th century. Over time, with the penetration of the British, NP evolved from a Portuguese based pidgin to an English based one. Today, NP is no longer a simplified trade language but has developed more complex

grammatical structures and evolved into a creole which is the first language of a group of people.

Nigeria is the most populous black nation on earth with a population of 237,372,922 (Worldometer, 2025). It is also home to hundreds of indigenous languages. By reason of colonization, English emerged as the official language and lingua franca of the nation. However, in recent times, Nigeria Pidgin (NP) has dominated as the de facto lingua franca especially in informal contexts. NP bridges communication gap between Nigeria's diverse linguistic groups. It is no longer seen as the language of illiterates and semi-literates but "nowadays, the use of Nigerian Pidgin English is more widespread even among educated people and perceived as more Nigerian than English" (Goglia cited in Garko, 2021). NP is therefore not just a language that bridges communication gap but a symbol of Nigerian identity.

Nigerian Pidgin and the Language Policy in Nigeria

The language policy in post-colonial Nigeria, and in most parts of Africa that were historically colonial outposts favours the language of the colonial masters as the official language. These languages are colonial impositions that were and continue to be embraced by postcolonial African regimes. This phenomenon is termed 'coloniality of language by stealth', a concept for describing the ways colonial languages continue to be used as a technology of political control, manipulation and subtle cultural normalization (Phipps, 2024, p.75).

There are two documents that contain the language policy of Nigeria- The Nigerian Constitution and The National Policy on Education. Section 55 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that "the affairs of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo when adequate arrangement have been made thereof". In 2022, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) through the

Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) approved the National Language Policy (NLP) which states that the language of instruction will be in the child's mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community (LIC) from Early Child Care Development Education (ECCDE) to Primary 6. Government's insistence on the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the pre-primary school is to effect a smooth transition from home to school. The use of mother tongue in schools - the first language learned by the child to express his ideas about himself and the world he lives in – enhances continuity in the child's learning process and therefore maximizes his intellectual development. When a child uses one language which he is familiar with at home and switches to a foreign language, psychologically distant from him in school, a gap between the home and school is created which may introduce feelings of inadequacy and resentment towards the self, teacher and school.

This invariably slows down the child's learning process (Chumbow, 1990). With the above assertion, one begins to wonder the fate of numerous children especially in the Niger-Delta region whose mother-tongue is Nigerian pidgin. Also, many children who Nigerian Pidgin is not their first language have learned it as a result of socialization and the ease with which it is learned. It is therefore pertinent that it is used as a medium of instruction to facilitate learning. As Wedgwood cited in Gani-Ikilama (1990) observed:

> If we use a medium of instruction so alien as English, we are putting a premium on parrot-learning and we enormously increase his (i.e. a child's) difficulties in thinking about and understanding the unfamiliar world of facts and ideas to which his school lessons are introducing him. Because pidgin is much simpler to him to acquire than English, because it is freely spoken by a large proportion of his elders and is part of the cultural environment into which he has been born, it is an easier medium of learning and

> thought…than English is, and therefore a better medium of instruction for him however ugly and ungainly to tongue it seems to us (p.224-225).

The use of pidgin as a medium of instruction has been successful in places like Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuata. It is therefore a workable option in Nigeria. Marcchese and Schnukal (1980) and Ofuani (1981) cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991) have reported the informal and unofficial use of Nigerian Pidgin in classrooms which is against official policy. It is a wonder that Nigerian Pidgin has not been officially made a medium of education in the primary school in those areas where it is the first language of children and the language of the immediate community even when the N.P.E demand that children should be taught in their mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community.

According to Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p. 142) state thus:

> It is curious that Nigerian Governments, both at the state and the federal levels, simply never mention NP (Nigerian Pidgin). It is as if it does not exist. And yet, if the population of those who do speak NP in one form or the other is a metrestick for determining what is a major language, then NP is definitely a major Nigerian language.

While language policies are generally designed with good intentions, they also have a darker side. They often result in unintended consequences such as the social, economic and political exclusion or marginalization of speakers of minority ethnic and languages (Phipps, 2024). A language policy leads to exclusion when it prioritizes one or some languages over others. This leads to effective marginalization of minority language speakers and denying them access to important areas like education, employment, and government thus creating a social barrier and limiting their participation in society. This is often called a form of linguistic discrimination.

Lack of development and standardization are some of the problems that hinder Nigerian Pidgin from effectively competing for government recognition. However, Elugbe and Omamar (1991) point out that whatever Nigerian Pidgin lacks in actual terms today, it more than makes up for in potential. Its potential, they believe is greater than that of any other Nigerian language essentially because it facilitates communication over most parts of the country and is more widely spoken in Nigeria than any one of the three major languages.

Attitudes to Nigerian Pidgin

Hymes (1971) cited in Wardhaugh (1998) points out that pidgin and creoles were highly ignored by linguists before 1930's because they were regarded as 'marginal languages'. He further notes that "some linguists were advised to keep away from studying them lest they jeopardize their careers" (p.54). Fromkin et al (2011, p. 457) note that the Encyclopedia Britannica once described pidgins as "an unruly bastard jargon, filled with nursery imbecilities, vulgarisms and corruptions". It however, no longer uses such definition. According to Jowitt he concludes that:

> For a long time, laymen and professional linguists regarded a pidgin as a debased form of a standard language, which was used instead of the standard language by those who were incapable of or at least had not the opportunity of learning the latter. Recently, the trend among linguists have been to regard Pidgins as languages that deserve recognition in their own right and are worthy of scholarly attention as any other speech-systems (1991, p.12).

Speaking about Pidgin in the earlier part of the century, Talbot (1926) cited in Gani-Ikilama (1990, p.126) said that it is "a lingua franca spoken over the greater part of West Africa where there are British firms…With the spread of education, there is very little doubt that it will die out". However, although education has spread

considerably since then, Nigerian Pidgin, despite stigmatization, keeps waxing stronger, spreading to all parts of the country and evolving to meet the language needs of the populace.

Nigerian Pidgin has had its fair share of the linguistic prejudice. Obilade (1979) cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p. 52) describes Nigerian Pidgin as "…restricted almost exclusively to the underprivileged or those who consider themselves underlings for the purpose of particular occasions". Agheyisi (1971), also cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p.50) describe typical Nigerian Pidgin speakers as "the majority of people who have little or no formal education …generally made up of unskilled labourers in government projects or agencies…petty traders, store keepers, market women, taxi and lorry (truck) drivers, e.t.c." This claim, although might have been true of Nigerian Pidgin at some point in its history, is out of tune to its current reality in Nigeria today.

The marginalization of Nigerian Pidgin, like other pidgins, is as a result of the circumstances of its origin and the attitudes towards them on the part of those who speak the language from which it is derived (Wardhaugh, 1998). As Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p.139) aptly put it, "outside the context of a country with a history of colonization, it is quite conceivable that the question of a possible attitude to one's own language may not arise at all". The problem is often compounded by the fact that the language of the former colonial master is termed a language of wider international communication, scientific and technological development, and official language and automatically becomes the key to socio-economic success. Another drawback of Nigerian Pidgin is its lack of status which stems from the fact that ability to speak it confers no social advantage on the speaker (Elugbe & Omamar, 1991). Against this background, the prevailing ideology generally rates English over Nigerian Pidgin. On the attitude of educated Nigerians towards pidgin, Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p. 142) state that "there is a definite, almost romantic longing to know more

about the language. Those who cannot speak it would love to speak it…Those who do speak it are, these days, quite willing to show off". However, they also note that educated Nigerians do not accept Nigerian Pidgin on the same footing as the other Nigerian languages and English. They also tend to shield their children from Nigerian Pidgin. According to them, this very attitude suggests an educated Nigerian's belief is that Nigerian Pidgin is inferior to Standard English" (p.142). Jibril (1995, p. 235-236) reports that:

> The chairman of the Rivers State Post-Primary Schools Board, Chief N. A. Ngofa, was reported to have appealed to teachers in the state to discourage their students from using NP, as it was interfering with their learning of Standard English. Along the same line, one Emmanuel Sule, writing in the *National Concord* of March18th, 1994, argues that it is scandalous for students to speak NP as they then become indistinguishable from market women.

In recent times, pidgin has come to be recognized for reflecting linguistic creativity and no longer 'degenerations' and 'deviations from other systems' (Wardhaugh, 1998, p.54). Like any other language, pidgin is also a marker of identity. However, in the case of Nigeria with its linguistic pluralism, it is a marker of national as opposed to ethnic identity. Also, pidgin has been found to have like properties as other languages and so, can stand as a language of its own and not the debased form of a particular language.

Although English remains the official language and the language of education in Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin is the most popular lingua franca widely spoken not just in the Niger Delta region alone but in many big cities, tertiary institutions, police and military formations, and the Sabon-Gari areas of northern Nigeria with current estimate of 5 million first language speakers and 75 million second language speakers in Nigeria and Nigerian Diaspora communities in Europe, America and other parts of the world (Esizimetor and Egbokhare, 2012). Though Nigerian Pidgin has been stereotyped as a debased English, it has become a useful

language for public enlightenment campaigns to reach the grass root. It is also used in radio and television programmes, commercial advertisements, stand-up comedies, pop music, religious music, and for everyday business transactions all-round the country. Nigerian pidgin has flourished as a medium of inter-ethnic communication especially in large cities with many non-indigenous residents (like Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Abuja) and throughout states with many minor ethnic groups.

Some Existing Proposals for National Language in Nigeria

Several proposals have been put forward concerning the choice of a national language in Nigeria, each with its merits and demerits. Few of these proposals will be reviewed here. Soyinka (1977), cited in Jowitt (1995) proposed the adoption of Swahili as a national language. It is a lingua franca in East Africa and already a national language in Tanzania and Kenya. However, Swahili does not have any constituency in Nigeria and therefore was not accepted.

Osaji (1979) in Sofunke (1990, p.38) analyzes Nigeria's situation as being characterized by a "multiplicity of antagonistic great traditions" whose competition makes for a rather "constant internal tension and inter-ethnic disunity". He supports the government's position that each child should be made to learn one of the three major languages in Nigeria other than his own mother tongue. He rules out the possibility of adopting one national language since according to him, a language has to be politically neutral to become a national language and there is no politically neutral indigenous language in Nigeria.

Sofunke (1990) makes the case for a non-WAZOBIA language as a national language. He opines that a language policy in a multilingual and multicultural country like Nigeria will have to be conciliatory, following the path of least resistance. He proposes that in choosing a national language, we have to concentrate on languages which have historically been serving as the connecting

link between the South and the North. He is of the opinion that a language will meet three criteria – political, cultural and linguistic- to qualify as a national language. He discredits the WAZOBIA languages based on the political aspect. According to him:

> Hausa is perceived by not a few Nigerians as the language of a "hegemonic" faction of the Nigerian ruling class whose use of political power from the outset of the period of our political independence has become perhaps the loudest argument against the adoption of Hausa as our national language. Any attempt to make Hausa the national language is bound to be seen as an attempt to further entrench, at a cultural level, the preponderance of northern political interest…Yoruba is ruled out on the basis of real or imagined cultural imperialism but more importantly because it is the language of the leading comprador faction of the ruling class. There is no chance for Igbo as a result of lingering memories of pre-civil war agitations against Igbo domination (p.45).

On the cultural angle, he points out that all the indigenous traditions in Africa- African tradition, Arabic-Islamic civilization and the Euro-Christian civilization- reside in Nigeria. In choosing a national language therefore, only languages that serve as the cultural bridge between the Islamic north and the Christian south should be considered. On the linguistic basis, he considers the language families of Nigerian languages and posits that a national language should come from the linguistic core as opposed to the linguistic fringe. This is because, it will have the same set of linguistic properties with most of Nigerian languages and this will facilitate learnability. He finally proposes Igala as the language that meets these criteria and because it indicates strong linguistic and cultural ties with three major ethnic zones in Nigeria.

However, as Jowitt (1995, p. 46) points out, "the alleged neutrality of any minority language proves to be illusory". This is because

the acceptability of a minority language is always greater outside the circle of its immediate geographical neighbours than within.
Mr Igbineweka proposed an artificial language which he called 'Guosa' as the national language. He based the language on twenty-two existing Nigerian languages and he produced a 52-page dictionary for it. Criticisms against this proposal include its artificiality and that Mr Igbineweka "would be the sole arbiter of the grammaticality of any of its sentences, which would be absurd" (Jowitt, 1995, p.45).

Nigerian Pidgin and the National Language Question

A national language is "a symbol of national oneness, of the achievement of independence and nationhood Elugbe" (1990, p.10). From the above definition, English is not a national language in Nigeria. One of the reasons given for the need for a national language is that "English is the language of our erstwhile colonial masters and so reminds us of our sad past" (Elugbe & Omamar, 1991, p.144). We need to reject the path of neo-colonialism and opt for the path of national liberation. According to Sofunke (1990, p. 32):

> The need for a national language goes beyond merely facilitating communication. It is an issue that is closely linked with our national identity at a politico-cultural level. More fundamental however is the ideological imperative of Nigeria as the largest concentration of black peoples in the world. The leadership roles that accidents of history and geography has placed on Nigeria dictates that she becomes the master of her colonial and neo-colonial history.

Simpson (1978) cited in Sofunke (1990, p.33) lists the following as reasons for the need to adopt an indigenous language as a national language – national consciousness and pride; cultural dynamism; psychological equilibrium; and mass communication. As Walter Mignolo (2011) cited in Phipps (2024, p. 156) aptly puts it, "we must step away from inherited Eurocentric habits through delinking from colonial legacies".

A number of linguists have proposed Nigerian Pidgin as the best option for resolving the national language and national identity question in Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin is the language of the people as opposed to English which is the language of the state imposed under the aegis of colonial imperialism

Nigerian Pidgin is the most ethnically neutral lingua franca used in the country. It is also a lingua franca that is grounded in local cultural contextual particularities including cultural practices and identities, discursive practices, linguistic frontiers, social relationships and interconnections, among others. The adoption of any of our indigenous languages as a national language may lead to calls of conflict and calls for perceived cases of marginalization. Elugbe (1995) argues that Nigerian Pidgin is a national language in Nigeria. He points out that a language may be national by being spoken all over Nigeria, by being indigenous and by being declared 'national'. According to him, "Nigerian Pidgin is national because it meets two of these requirements: it is geographically spread all over Nigeria and spoken by Nigerians of different origins; and it is indigenous to Nigeria because it originated from Nigeria" p.291).

Nigerian Pidgin can also function in some contexts as a national identity marker as opposed to indigenous languages which are ethnic identity markers. It is also a symbol of unity and solidarity. It is on this note that Okeke-Ezigbo cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1995) argues that the Nigerian writer who adopts Nigerian Pidgin in his writing becomes a real nationalist and can now speak with the knowledge of an insider.

However, enthusiasm for Nigerian Pidgin as the national language does not seem to be widespread or increasing. This is because Nigerian Pidgin is English-based, so, very few Nigerians see it as a Nigerian language but rather, as a debased form of English.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that Nigerian Pidgin is in many ways the most logical choice for a national language in Nigeria, it has received no official recognition by the government. The official stance on it remains negative even though it is used by all demographics in the nation. This research therefore seeks to find out the cause for this apathy towards Nigerian Pidgin. This is important because the issue of an indigenous national language is a matter of national pride and consciousness and a symbol of our independence. It is therefore improper to continue using the language of imperialism when an eligible national language stares us in the face.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study-

What are Nigerians attitudes towards the emergence of Nigerian Pidgin as a national language?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is postcolonial theory. It is a critical analysis of the cultural, political and economic effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. According to LittleJohn and Foss (2008), "scholars working in the postcolonial movement are devoted to examining Eurocentrism, imperialism, and the processes of colonization and decolonization- all the ways which the colonial experience can be understood as an ideology of domination" (p.343). Edward Said is considered the originator of postcolonialism with his work on "Orientalism". Frantz Fanon analyzed the psychological effects of colonization on colonized people, including the internalization of inferiority associated with the colonial language.

Postcolonialism considers how colonialism affects identity, including gender, race and class; examines how European languages and traditions replaced native languages and cultures; and also considers how colonized peoples are represented in

literature by colonizing cultures. Postcolonialism represents an ideological response to colonialist thought, rather than simply describing a system that comes after colonialism, as the prefix post- may suggest. Neocolonialism is a focus of postcolonial theory. This is colonialism's remaining capitalist structures, influences, and practices. Postcolonialism, when applied to language policy, examines how the legacy of colonialism continues to impact language use and power dynamics within a nation. This theory is used in this paper to examine the power dynamics of language subjugation in Nigeria and how it impacts people's attitudes and language policy decisions.

Methodology

A mixed method research design is employed in order to provide more in-depth findings. Questionnaire was given out to fifty respondents to determine the attitude of Nigerians to the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin as a national language. The population of the respondents was students of Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Purposive sampling was used to select five departments – English, Linguistics, African and Asian Studies (Igbo), Chinese and Modern European Languages- and ten respondents were chosen from each department. The choice of these departments was made because they deal with languages and their students are therefore in a better position to give an opinion on language matters.

Respondents Demographics

Department	Male	Female	Total
English Language and Literature	5	5	10
Linguistics	4	6	10
Igbo, African and Communication Studies	2	8	10
Modern European Languages	3	7	10
Chinese	6	4	10
Total	20	30	50

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the respondents' responses to the questionnaire. A majority of the respondents (96%) claimed to speak NP. 30% considered NP to be a distinct language. 70% considered NP a variety of English. 20% supported that textbooks and instructional materials should be written in NP even though that 94% admitted to reading materials in NP. Only 24% supported the teaching of NP in schools. 90% watch and listen to programmes in NP on radio and television. The majority of the respondents 84% claimed that NP has the ability to express their thoughts and feelings. 56% admitted to using NP more than English and their indigenous languages to communicate with other Nigerians. Finally, only 36% supported the adoption of NP as a national language.

In general, the results show that even though the respondents use NP, the number that wants it to be used as a national language is quite little. This negative attitude could be as a result of the stigmatization of NP. Also, colonization imposed dominant languages, cultures and values marginalizing indigenous languages and cultures. English has become a dominant language associated with power, education and economic opportunities. Since Nigerian Pidgin does not give these privileges, it is not highly rated as English. Through domination, cultural devaluation and linguistic imperialism, colonization has turned Nigerians against their language making them to embrace that of the colonizers due to the feeling of inferiority it has created.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that Nigerian Pidgin is the best choice for national language. However, as it can be seen in the paper, its advantages are offset by the attitude of Nigerians to it as well as its lack of standardization. As pidgin is believed to be the "mark of an inferior intellect" (Elugbe & Omamar, 1991, p.150), no nation

would want its national language to be considered inferior to other languages.

However, with the proliferation of technological innovation and the way language is adapting to the challenges of today's explosive digital era, it is expected that Nigerian Pidgin will have many more speakers soon. Hopefully, this will lead to its recognition as one of the official languages in Nigeria.

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