



The National Language Controversy: The Nigerian Pidgin English as a Rescue

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Abstract

There have been several arguments for and against the adoption of the Nigerian Pidgin English as a National language. While some support that it should be adopted conveniently as a National language especially as Nigeria is a multi-linguistic; multi-ethnic society; some others argue vehemently against it; claiming that a bastardised form of the British Standard English cannot be accorded such a rare honour. This paper basically made an exposition of the origin; values and extent of acceptability of the Pidgin English in Nigeria; despite the diverse attitudes of its users in advocating its adoption as a National language, in the wake of the vigorous search for a National language.

Keywords: Adoption; Multi-linguistic; Multi-ethnic; Pidgin; National language.

Introduction

We all live in a world of many languages; as no society exists without its own language. It is indeed the factor of existence of every human race. Amusa (2013) citing Babajide (2000) posits that language is the most distinguishing phenomenon between man and other creatures. It is the most enduring of every people's cultural heritage. Language is a vital tool through which human beings communicate with one another.

While enumerating the importance of language in any human society; Alimi (2010) describes language as an instrument of persuasion, aggression, felicitation, entertainment, fabrication, integration, education among others. It remains a vehicle for social modification and direction of people's behaviour.

Citing Muslim (2010); Amusa (2013) succinctly identifies the functions of any languages as of information, expression, reformation, persuasion, education and entertainment. In all, it is evident that a language is a *sine-quanon* in every human society.

In Nigeria, the English language has become the dominant language in many domains of activities. It is often described as the most important and enduring legacy left behind by the British; as it performs many functions in the multi-linguistic; multi-ethnic society as Nigeria. It has been functioning as the official language as it is being used to perform official

functions in government services and activities, official discussions, correspondences, procedures, Minutes of meetings and speeches are conducted in English.

It is also; as Alimi (2010) observed; the language of Education; as even the National policy on Education (1981) stipulates that English should be used as a medium of instruction from primary four to tertiary institutions.

The English Language is used to conduct businesses in the media; the Judiciary, trading activities, international relations; to mention a few.

National language

Aliyu (2023) describes a national Language as a language spoken by the large part of the population of the country which may or may not be designated by law to be employed in the public domain. A National language is the language spoken by the majority of the population, who are the citizens of the nation. It's the identity of the Nation. In each country she affirmed that a National language is used to unite the people e.g. Japanese in Japan, Chinese in China, French in France; and English in Great Britain. A National language must, as a matter of fact, cut across the entire strata of the society in its use and application. It is a language that is both elite and mass-oriented, integrating everybody in the society.



With the description given above therefore, it is crystal clear that there is a difference between an official language and a National language. An official language is the language used by government for official purposes. On the other hand, a National language is the language spoken by the majority of the population, who are the citizens of the nation. It is the identity of a nation.

This is the nexus of a raging debate about Nigeria's National language- Is there a National language in Nigeria?

In the context of Nigeria; no one language could be called a National language (a language of Unity). The English language is though, official, it is not qualified as a National language because it is only spoken by the few educated Nigerians. The same applies to the three major indigenous languages of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba; which are clearly the three major regional languages which use are largely restricted to their regions.

Hence, the search for a National Language continues.

Adopting the Nigerian Pidgin English as a National Language.

Pidgins are simplified languages created or formed from different languages by people who do not have a common language (Joshua, 2018).

They arise as a result of language contact situations for trade, commerce and other interactions among people who do not share common languages. In Nigeria, Pidgin is English-mixed with our indigenous languages.

There was no way the history of Pidgin in Nigeria could be traced without an adequate mention of the Portuguese explorers who, in 1472, were the first group of Europeans to explore Nigeria. They arrived on the coast of Niger Delta, which was then controlled by the Benin Kingdom. At the time, the Niger Delta region communities- Edo, Annang, Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Isoko had no common language. So, it was very easy for the Portuguese to come with a Portuguese lexifier pidgin. On arrival, the Portuguese started trading brass and copper for ivory, cloth, pepper and human slaves.

The Nigerian Pidgin English, as Aliyu (2023) noted, was borne out of necessity in the 17th century when the British brought alongside their trade, religion, schools and politically, English became the language of instructions at the colonial government level. Those who worked with them as servants, interpreters, drivers, catechists etc., had their indigenous languages infused into English. Some even changed their names as a mark of identifying with the elite. At this point, the NPE was borne.

The Nigerian Pidgin English started as a broken, bastardized variant of English language, but overtime, it has spread so widely that every tribe in Nigeria has a variant. The NPE is stronger in the Niger Delta comprises heterogeneous linguistic groups in small, minority speech and communities with a variety of dialects. So, when English fused in, the contact languages erupted another variety which is now the NPE.

The growth of the Nigerian Pidgin English in the Southern part of Nigeria is stronger than it is, in the Western region. The West of Nigeria has a dialect of a common language which is Yoruba, which has not allowed NPE to grow as such. The same goes for the North and the East where Hausa is a unifying language in the former, and Ibo; in the latter.

In the Niger Delta region however, the NPE has even creolized into a Native language. The younger generation in this area do not speak their indigenous language anymore as those indigenous languages are gradually going into extinction. By the by, the Nigerian Pidgin English becomes a transgenerational tool of communication in the Niger Delta.

Today, the once-described pidgin language as an adulterated English, has now become developed, spread and valued in the different sectors in Nigeria.

Onome and Ogunjinmi (2020) observed that although the pidgin has not been officially recognized, it is already a language for social interaction, commercial activities, political campaigns and also it has provided an enabling environment for effortless communication among Nigerians irrespective of any class affiliations.



Aliyu (2023) noted that Pidgin English has grown tremendously in the media sector, as it has become a voice in international media and advertisement. She noted that it has received accolades from global media practitioners as they have been using it to connect their local and international audiences. Giving an illustration, Aliyu (2023) observed that in a bid to expand their reach in Nigeria, the British broadcasting corporation (BBC)- an international media academy launched an outline news service which publishes and reports. Within a year of the launch, it had garnered 75million listeners from Nigeria and Cameroon. She emphasized that a lot of Nigerian media houses; for instance; WAZOBIA FM, have been engaging in broadcasting in pidgin to the relish of the audience; since 2014 on their stations, we hear statements as "Nigerians dey waka enter America like say tomorrow no dey"; "Presido Tinubu don land for Lagos from Abuja gidigba" "The police be our friend" "France don win the world cup" etc.

Still underscoring the ubiquitous use of the Nigerian pidgin English; Aliyu (2023) underlined its social interaction and Socio-economic values. She noted that the NPE has fulfilled the primary function of language; which is communication. Its status as pidgin in one region and a creole in another no doubt testifies to its importance. In Niger Delta, Pidgin is creolizing. It is being used for daily communication, social interactions and business activities. Where pidgin has not grown to the level of creole, it has developed so much that the commercial activities and business operations are rendered in Nigerian Pidgin. The use of Pidgin is prevalent and widely spoken in our local markets among buyers and sellers who come together to exchange goods and services without a common language.

In Nigerian Tertiary Institutions, Chinazor, (2023) observed the Nigerian Pidgin has become a cultural force. It has found its way into the minds of the new generation students in the higher institutions of learning in the country.

Although, the English language is the language of instructions, most of the students prefer to express and identify themselves in Pidgin, just to make interactions cordial, easier and quicker.

Conclusion

Considering the invaluable and ubiquitous values of the Nigerian Pidgin English in the Nigerian society, especially its flexible use; simple grammar; acceptability in daily communication and interactions; business transactions; its common use in the media; the music industry; among the Youths; the students and even the Elites; it is no gainsay that the Pidgin English has indeed come to stay.

Hence, there is no need looking elsewhere for a national language. The Nigerian Pidgin English remains a free language- a language of unification and integration in all the regions of Nigeria. Its use cuts across all the multi-ethnic; multi-cultural divisions and strata of the Nigerian nation.

This paper therefore hinged its support for the NPE as substantially qualified as a National language, considering all its potentials and its already invaluable use.

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