
**THE NIGERIAN PIDGIN ENGLISH AS AN EMERGING CODE OF COMMUNICATION AMONG
NIGERIAN IN PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS**

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ABSTRACT

Considering the colossal role of the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) in filling the communication lacunae and as the most viable cum acceptable choice of a national or official language amongst the diverse ethnic conglomerations and diverse tongues in a highly multilingual society as Nigeria, this paper seeks to make a case for the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) to occupy that exalted pride of place as our national language or lingua franca. The stance of this paper is being hinged on the neutrality of the code in terms of its origin and originality as there is no particular ethnic bloc or grouping that can lay claim to it. However, it (NPE) can be adopted as our national language. The NPE is one of the varieties of the English language that is used and spoken by all Nigerians, no matter how highly or lowly educated. It can be used in both formal and informal settings. No doubt, linguists have identified over 450 indigenous languages that are spoken in Nigeria. Out of these numbers, three or the “big three”; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (HIY) enjoy the rare privilege or constitutional backing to wear the garb of “major” languages while all others are “minor” languages. This defective dichotomy is queried here, as it prioritised political consideration over linguistic considerations. Of all the languages used and spoken in Nigeria, the English language and its cousin – NPE occupy the driving seat and as such, enjoy the new status of a national or official language or a lingua franca. The position of this paper is to canvas support in the adoption of NPE as the lingua franca of Nigeria since the majority of Nigerians across ethnic groupings and religious leanings use and speak it. Besides, the active force of our youthful population or younger generation also relish in the use of NPE. This code has the potentials to rekindle the spirit of our national unity, cohesion and integration.

Keywords: *Creole, Nigerian Pidgin English, Creolise, Nigerianisation, Englishisation, Sociolinguistic*

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Introduction:

The diversity of Nigeria accounts for the multiplicity of indigenous languages spoken in the country. No doubt, Nigeria is a highly multilingual society. Over the years, linguists and scholars have estimated the number of language spoken in Nigeria as ranging from 300 – 500 [1]; [2]. Most Nigerian languages belong to the three main language families; Niger-Congo, the Afro-Asiatic and the Nilo-Saharan. The Niger-Congo, with its subgroups which include such languages as the Bariba, Biron, Busa, Chamba, Edo (including Bini and Urhobo), Efik (including Ibibio), Fulani, Idoma, Igbo, Izon, Jukun, Kambari, Nupe, Tiv, Vere and Yoruba. On the other hand, the Afro-Asiatic consists of Angas, Bachama, Bura, Hausa, Margi, Schuwa and other. This language family is subcategorized into Chadic, semitic, and Berber-languages. Of all these, the Chadic languages predominate with 70+ languages, Semitic is represented by various dialects of Arabic spoken in the North East. Nilo-Saharan language family includes Dendi, Kanuri, and others (<http://onlinenigeria.com/tribes>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/languagesofnigeria>).

Language is a veritable tool of human communication and a feature which most distinguished man from the lower animals. Linguistic research has shown that the lower animals communicate but they do not use a code that is highly sophisticated and complex as the human language. Also, language is a tool of identification, communication, interaction, unification and a “carrier” of a people’s culture Okoh [3] commented thus:

A further aspect of the many sidedness of language concerns the fact that it tells us an enormous deal about its users, their personality, world view, or entire cultural accountments. Language is thus typical an index, and in the sense, especially one of the factors to identify a particular group of people even differentiate them from contiguous group (p.3)

The above quotation captures a language as the tool for identification and a component of a people’s culture and cosmology. And as such, a people of a nation are easily identified and associated with a particular culture and tradition through their language. To demonstrate this, a Nigeria is easily identified when she/he speaks any Nigeria language such as Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ikwerre, Nupe, Izon, Efik, Bini etc and Nigerian pidgin or NE.

In a related development, Oladele Awobuluyi [4] identifies three functions of any language as symbolic [identification], unifying and the instrumental [means of communication] According to him:

language as a symbol performs the very same function that a national flag, national anthem, national currency, national troupes, or national soccer / Olympic team etc. performs for a nation. It serves as a means of uniquely identifying that nation and differentiating it from all others in the world...

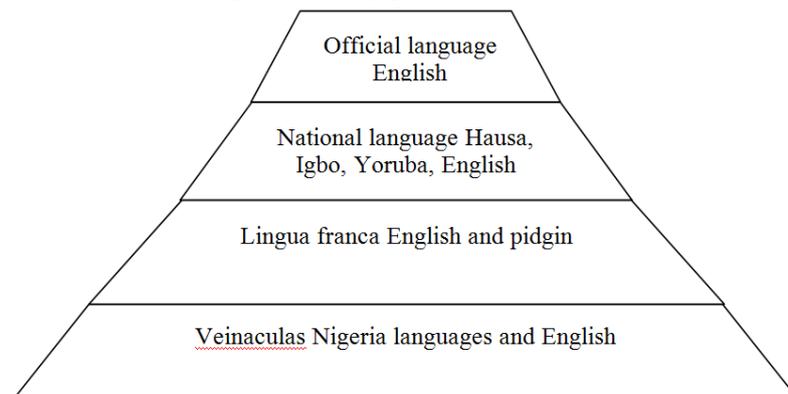
A language-in-common, by which I mean language that is used throughout an area or a nation, has a unifying function for the people or peoples of that area or nation... The third and final function in any nation is as a tool or means of communication for message intended for all or most parts of that nation (p.7-9)

From the foregoing, the indispensability of language in national identity, unity and interaction is harnessed. Therefore, the issues of language must be given proper attention in its preservation and development for any meaningful socio-economic and political advancement in Nigeria.

No doubt, the English language whose original homeland was within the British Islands and the Americas, has grown and spread its tentacles to every nook and cranny of the globe. Its unprecedented geographical spread, influence of its owners [British and America's] and the dominance of ICT and globalisation have made it possible for the emergence of "New Englishes" all over the globe. The English language is being used as an L₁, L₂ and a foreign language in different parts of the world. In the British Islands and American shores, it is used as native or first language; in British colonies all over the world, it is used as a second language and other territories where it is used as a foreign language for the purpose of wider communication and global businesses or interaction and discourse.

The English language became a second language (that is an L₂) in Nigeria, simply, because of our historical affinity or ties with the British. It became a colonial heritage and one imposition that has endangered the survival of our indigenous languages.

However, in the midst of over 450 indigenous language and the ferocious contention of which of them to occupy the "driving seat" at the national scene, Pidgin English or what we refer to here, as Nigerian Pidgin English is used for inter-ethnic communication thereby encouraging national unity. Pidgin English replaced Portuguese based pidgins, which was introduced by the early Portuguese explorers who visited the Coast of West Africa for trade and finally set their feet on the Ancient Kingdom of Benin. The quest to booster the relationship between the West Africans and the Portuguese led to the introduction of a neutral language of communication between the Benin traders and their European counterparts. This gave birth to a Portuguese based Pidgin. Around the 19th Century, the British inherited Nigeria as her colony and therefore, replaced the medium of communication. Hence, the Portuguese – based pidgin became substituted with an English-based pidgin, which later, metamorphosed to Nigerian pidgin English. In some linguistic quarters, this code of communications is also known as Anglo-Pidgin, Pidgin English or Nigerian Pidgin. Williamson [1] in an article posited that "...far from English reducing its hold over communication in formal contexts, it seems to be extending. English or its humble consin pidgin, seems to be steadily growing at the expense of Nigerian languages". Besides, this role of a linguistic colossus can be summarily and diagrammatically presented below:



Source: Udofot [5]

Englishes in Nigeria- Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin English:
Englishes in Nigeria

By Englishes, this paper presents the maze of varieties of the English language that have Nigerian colours and are used and spoken in Nigeria by Nigerians. The term “Englishes” is now, technically employed to designate the different varieties of the world’s lingua franca.

Jowitt [6] notes: “Kachru also became celebrated for extending the concept of “Englishes” to include “new Englishes” the new, non-native varieties of English which have been taking shape since colonial times and which had already attracted comments. In a related development Tamunobelema [7] wrote:

At least one basic fact has become patent among practitioners of sociolinguistics; It is that languages have varieties of linguistics studies which account for the consequences of the different uses and use situations of a language (p.232)

However, considering the donkey’s age of the language in Nigeria and its enormous impact on Nigerians, English has metamorphosed into maze of varieties. Varieties of lanaguage is an aspect. The world’s lingua franca is used in different context to suit different purposes.

Nigerian English (NE)

As the world’s lingua franca, the English language is no longer the exclusive property of the British Isles and America but a global one. This elevated and new status necessitates the entrenchment of the language in almost every corner of the earth. It is used as a native language, second language and a foreign language. Today, there are so many Englishes or maze of varieties of the English language. L₁ varieites include British English, American English, New Zealand English, L₂, varieties such as Indian English, Nigerian English, Kenya English, Singaporean English to mention a few; Brazilian English, Chinese English, Mexican English, Turkish English are the demains where English is used as a foreign language.

In this sense therefore, Nigerian English is a brand of English that is distinct with some peculiar features. Though this brand exists, a scholar as Wokoma [8] seems to be sceptical and pessimistic about its validity. He associates NE as an informal English or a non-standard variety of English. Wokoma [8] held this misconception:

Much of the English heard in Nigeria could be defined as containing *lingusitic flaws* which may seem typical but necessarily Nigerian per se. such flaws as limited vocabulary, poor spelling, misused idioms and a tendency to use verbose language sometimes in Biblical or archaic manner and a weak group of structural patterns are typically markers of the learner’s level of proficiency and education; and markers also of NE.

By implication, what Wokoma appears to suggest is that any deficiency in the use of English by anyone is termed NE. This position is flawed in its entirety because NE is a distinct variety of its own with attendant linguistic features. NE is a Nigerian brand of English which evolved as, a result of the domestication or nativisation or “nigerianisation” of the English language in the linguistic landscape of Nigeria or what Okoh [9] calls the “Englishization of indigenous language in Nigeria. Such scholars as [10], [11], [12], [8], [6], [5], [13] acknowledge that, NE is a distinct form of English from other Englishes and had its own linguistic features. According to **Ogunsiji (2004)**, Nigerian English:

...Has not yet precisely defined, but what is obvious is that there is Nigerian English as a nativised variety of English in Nigeria with its peculiarities which are conditioned by the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. Since its inception in Nigeria, the English language has been adopting to its Nigerian socio-cultural milieu and this adaptation has affected the character of the language [2].

NE is yet to get the much deserved recognition as it still grapples with the challenges of international usage and acceptability. In his opinion, Jowitt [14] makes a case for two varieties of NE. He identifies “Popular Nigerian English” (PNE) as a substandard form and “Standard Nigerian English” (SNE) as the standard form of Nigerian English. Nigerian English would be hardly understood if spoken or used outside the linguistic shores of Nigeria. Blench and Dendo [12] express their feelings over the similarity between NE and other West African varieties. In their words; “one of the mere surprising thing about Nigerian English is that extent to which it has a common lexicon and grammar with other West

African Englishes, notably Ghanaian”. These scholars view NE as distinct from Pidgin English as there is usually no exact boundary between them as this differs from speaker to speaker.

Ndimele [11] remarked that NE spreads through constant intra-communication amongst Nigerians. It has its own marked characteristics at the phonological, lexical, semantic and syntactic levels. The following are some succinct examples of the lexical level, of what typify as Nigerian English:

Nigeria English forms	Standard English forms
Go-slow	traffic jam
Chop	eat, food
Cow meat	beef
Wayo	trickster
Light	Electricity, power supply
Longer throat	salivate
Zinc	corrugated iron sheet
Drinking joint	Bar
Hear a smell	Perceive an odour
Dash	Gift, bribe

In this section, this paper deliberately dwelt on this length on NE to enable our leadership appreciate the link between a domesticated Nigerian brand of English – NE and the pidgin English christened Nigeria pidgin English. These two English’s share a lot in common. They bound words at will from each other.

Nigerian Pidgin English

The Nigerian Pidgin English otherwise, NPE is a creolized pidgin which has gained a status of lingua franca in some metropolitan cities in Nigeria. MC Arthur [15] classified pidgin into four according to their development: Jargon, stable pidgin, extended or expanded pidgin and creole, each characterised by a gradual increase in completeness. By every standard, NPE falls into the category of creole. A pidgin is said to be creolized when it is used as a first language acquired by children, particularly in urban areas. In a kind of a historical survey, NPE is a child of necessity. It metamorphosed from English –based Pidgin to Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).

During the era of Western exploration of Africa, the Portuguese who visited the Coastal states faced the challenges of communication. To solve this riddle a possible code of communication became imperative and hence, the introduction of a Portuguese – based pidgin. This became both a tongue of trade and contact between the aliens and natives. For some time, Portuguese based pidgin dominated as a code of communication but later, the British colonized the people and introduced English-based pidgin, which later grew to NPE, as it is used today. According to Banjo [16], Nigerian pidgin:

...originated on Nigerian soil without completely denying the specific theory of a Portuguese common origin. This we can do by suggesting that to being with, a Portuguese- based pidgin had developed in the country as a result of trade contact with the Portuguese... later, when the English displaced the Portugues, repletification followed

This kind of English, though used mainly in modern cities and rural areas for communication, remains a marginalized variety. The terms Pidgin, Pidgin English, Nigerian Pidgin, Anglo-Pidgin, all refer to the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as intended here. NPE is the favourite choice of communication in heterogenous cities and towns which accommodate people from different multicultural and multilingual backgrounds. In major Nigerian cities as Port Harcourt, Lagos, Warri, Abuja etc, NPE is a dominant code of communication by the literate, illiterate, poor, rich and the youth. In fact, NPE has gained the status of a mother tongue or first language in the cities, especially Port Harcourt, According to Simile [17], Anglo-pidgin:

Like any “national code” such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, English and French... is capable of expressing all domains of human interaction as such exhibits regional and social variations. Native speakers of this language can be drawn from multilingual

States is Southern Nigeria together with children born into (SIC) mixed marriages and residents of large cities as Lagos, Sabo-gari-areas of Kano, Jos, Abuja, Benin city, Warri, Sapele, Obudu and Port Harcourt coupled (though to a less extent) children inhabiting police, army and paramilitary barracks throughout the length and breathe of Nigeria

In terms of variations, Simile rightly posits that NPE, now has regional varieties as Bendel, Calabar, Lagos, Kano/Maiduguri and Port Harcourt variants. A variant is characterized by a preponderant influence of its substrate language on the form and usage of the variant. A variant has the vocabulary of a substrate language including its pronunciation, spelling, usage and meaning beyond the territory of the original speakers. This investigation is necessary to understand the social structures of the society and attitudes towards this variety of English. NPE borrows extensively from English, its mother tongue, indigenous languages and Nigerian English. To affirm this, Banjo [16] asserts: “to say that Nigerian Pidgin is not a dialect of English is not to deny that it is related in some ways to English, which after all, is its basis”.

NPE is a variety that is used by all in the society and a neutral code. In Nigeria, it has flourished as a favoured medium in the ever-growing “Comedy” Industry. Notable comedians such as Julius Agwu, Prince Hezekiah, Dan D’Humorous, Rugged Pastor, Ali Baba, I Go Die, Gordons, I Go Save, Basket Mouth, and “Diplomatic” Akas Baba etc captivate and thrill their teeming audience through the medium of NPE. In fact, it is observed that jokes are at best cracked or rendered in Pidgin, the medium where their hilarious flavour is appreciated and heightened! Also, there is an increasing usage of pidgin English in creative writing today among Nigerian literary scholars. Prolific Nigerian authors as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, INC Aniebo, Ola Rotimi etc have employed Pidgin English in their works. Here, the poetic medium is not left out. A perfect example to demonstrate this claim is Green’s “Dem ‘O’ Craze”:

Which kain democracy be dis
wey you buy land to build house
Buy generator, Dig borehole
And carry your dirty,
Then government go come collect tax
Take borehole fee
And NEPA bring bill
Then polytricksians go chop
Then whole revenue?

Though delivered at a harsh or more sarcastic tone, the persona bemoans the aberration in governance and negligence of the government to provide basic amenities to the citizenry. He frowns at the failure of government. The politicians fail to deliver the dividends of democracy. There is no plan of those in authorities; “government” to suggest or create new ways of generating wealth rather; “then polytricksians go chop/then whole revenue?” this is an excellent poetic piece craftly delivered in NPE. Also, in the music industry, such artistes as Fela, Lagbaja, Charlie Boy, Tu Face, Duncan Mighty, Timaya etc have their stock rendered in the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) On Nigerian University campuses, Pidgin English is used by both students and lecturers alike. Students use pidgin to perform the following functions:

- a) To herald social events within and outside campus
- b) To woo or talk about ladies or vice versa
- c) To express domestic needs like clothing and feeding
- d) For interpersonal/private discussion.

To buttress all these, we have:

- a) “we get runs dis weekend or show dey town dis weekend” (This purpose is to disseminate information on a forthcoming social event) = There is going to be a party in town this weekend.
- b) “If you wan run/scope that chick/babe, make you first download the baby’s data (for lecherous purpose) ⇒ If you want to woo that lady, you should first get some information on/about her.

- c) “Hunger dey wire me” (expressing desire for food) ⇒ I am hungry.
- d) “Make we yearn” (interpersonal level) ⇒ Let’s talk.

In another development, Tamunobelega [7] wrote on NPE:

In Nigeria, millions of people use English based pidgins especially in the Western, eastern and the south south zone of the country. A special feature of Pidgin is that it can easily be picked up for use as against the full-fledged languages by anyone. It is therefore the language of the uneducated, the Police, the prostitutes as well as market women for purpose of communication

The writer presents a picture above which depicts that NPE is not a variety for a selected few but for all Nigerians. It is a language of the highly educated elite, undergraduate teachers and the middle class in the Nigerian society. This work can affirm that NPE is a dominant code on campuses by both students and at times, the academics. The latter rarely use it in formal settings as lecture rooms or academic meetings but often use it in informal settings as chatting with colleagues or family members. In fact, NPE has flourished in all strata of the society. For example, two Professors of English met at a conference and exchanged pleasantries in a manner as those below:

Prof. A: “Oh boy, how you dey?”

Prof. B: “Long time no see”

Prof. A: “You don see Prof. Okoh sef?”

Prof. B: “Dem don give una plenty workload for dat side?”

Also, NPE is not excluded in some worship centres all over Nigeria Sermons are rendered in it and gospel songs composed in Pidgin too. We can hilariously intone here, that Jehovah God, the Creator also listens to and enjoys Nigerian Pidgin English. We hear such gospel songs as the following rendered in Pidgin!

- a) E don do am for me in a bigi way
Papa don do am for me in a bigi way
- b) Satan don fall for gota, marcham, marcham
E don fall for gota, marcham marcham
- c) People dey ask me say, na wetin de make me fine?
I just dey tell dem say, na Jesus dey make me fine
I dey fine, I dey fine, I dey fine!

NPE, though a marginalised variety, is a language of communication that has to be recognised and accorded a pride of place. On the numerical strength and geographical strength of its users and geographical spread, comments on the Nigerian Pidgin English as follows:

Well over half of the 140 million inhabitants of Nigeria are now fluent speakers of the language (NPE) making Nig P the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, as well as the indigenous African language with the largest number of speakers. Given the rapid of Nig. P amongst younger Nigerians, its proportion should increase to cover seventy to eighty percent by the time the present generation of children reached adulthood. There is no Creole language worldwide as nearly as many speakers of Nig. P.?

Therefore, NPE is a full-fledged language and here, treated as a variety of English in the comity of world Englishes as used in Nigeria’s linguistic landscape.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Conclusion

Having thoroughly gone through the journey of the Portuguese – based pidgin which later metamorphosed to English-based pidgin and now Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and its colossal roles in bridging the communication gap amongst the diverse ethnic groups or nationalities in Nigeria, this paper suggests that the NPE constitutionally backed up as either our national language or lingua franca. This call becomes imperative since there is no known native language spoken in Nigeria that can take up this role at the moment because of the fear of domination and unhealthy ethnic

rivalries amongst the diverse groups that make up Nigeria. There is no valid claim to its ownership. And as such, we call on linguists and other research partners to invest much in this variety to develop its standard orthography and work towards its standardization and global acceptability and intelligibility. As established in this paper, virtually everyone in Nigeria uses NPE either the highly educated or the lowly educated. Most importantly, NPE is a code that unites Nigerians thereby deepening our sense of national oneness, cohesion and integration. Nigerian are more united in the use of NPE.

Recommendations

After embarking on a well-researched journey, into the sociolinguistic domain, this paper makes bold to state the following recommendations.

- a) That the NPE be given a pride of place by way of according it a constitutional recognition as other languages: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, English and other unnamed vernaculars. It can also be studied as a subject in every educational institution in the country.
- b) That the policy makers in the educational sector should be lenient enough to encourage the use of the NPE as a variety of the English language.
- c) That the NPE should be respected and used compulsorily in both formal and informal settings by Nigerians and not to be disparaged or spited.
- d) That the government, at all levels should encourage research in this area through the award of scholarship and other incentive to boost the morale of scholars, students and academics alike.
- e) There should be a training and in-house training or retraining of teachers on this variety of the English language or “new English”.

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