



## MULTILINGUALISM AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria has over five hundred indigenous languages and over three hundred ethnic groups. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba seem to be recognised as national languages, but it could be observed that English language has dominated all these languages by being accorded a prestigious status. English language is the language of instruction in schools; it is the language of commerce and official meetings. Nigeria had her independence from the British sixty-six years ago; hence the need to have her own nationally recognised official language. To serve as a guide, it is imperative that language planners explore other multilingual countries to study how they went about selecting their national languages. Due to the multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural nature of the country, it is suggested that Nigerian Pidgin could be considered as a national/official language since the language does not belong to any particular tribe. It is expected that it would be generally acceptable since no tribe would feel slighted. A nation without a national language might not record any development, be it politically, socially, educationally or economically. For Nigeria to attain the expected height, homes, teachers and the government must work hand in hand. Language planners should come up with orthographies for the Nigerian languages to ease the teaching/learning of them.

**Keywords:** Language, National Language, Language Planners, Indigenous Language, Nigerian Pidgin

### **Introduction**

Language is a means of communication and it has four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Human beings are social animals. Therefore there is need for them to interact with one another. For effective interaction to take place, the language user must have mastered the skills involved in that particular language. This is known as language proficiency. Language should be used skillfully with accuracy, effectiveness and efficiency (Berdan, 2017). Language plays a vital role in the way a society's political structure is built and sustained; it is also a means of cultural transmission from generation to generation (Shehu, 2010, Omowon, 2016). It implies that a nation that has no standardised national language might not record any development, be it politically, educationally or economically. Language is a means of national unity; anthropologists see language as a term of culturally transmitted behaviour; sociologists view it as an interaction between members of a social group; students of literature view it as an artistic medium; philosophers refer to it as a means of interpreting human experience while language teachers see it as a set of skills (Adoti, 2020). From all indications, language is the key to success in every day-to-day endeavours.

Language contacts give rise to multilingual. The contact could occur through immigrants, education, religion, politics, war, slavery or trade and commerce. Multilingual is derived from Latin words: multi means many; lingua means languages. Multilingualism refers to the adoption and use of more than two languages by an individual or a society. Nordquist (2009) viewed multilingualism as the skills acquired by an individual speaker to communicate effectively in three or more languages; accordingly, a person that speaks multiple languages is known as a polyglot. Also, Ndukwe (2015) contended that multilingualism is the act of using or promoting many languages. Aronin (2018) divided multilingualism into two different forms: individual and societal. Individual multilingualism is also known as plurilingualism. It has to do with emotion as well as the attitude of the learners and speakers

of multiple languages in relation to their own and other languages. On the other hand, societal multilingualism refers to an organised and non-organised language practices as well as the implications of the practices on society.

This indicates that multilingualism has become a social phenomenon because of globalisation and cultural openness; no doubt, every individual benefits from it, be it an adult or a child, otherwise there would be breaking in communication barriers, and sharpening of one's knowledge of one's primary language by being conscious of its rules and subtleties. Adam (2020) opined that multilingualism promotes brain health by delaying the onset of dementia; with this, the working memory is improved by boosting the capacity of the short-term memory. Accordingly, a multilingual child performs better in the classroom and outside the classroom; the child has a bigger linguistic network for interacting with the world around him or her. Further stated is that multilingualism is an added advantage to an adult in the realm of employment by enhancing open door for professional opportunities across the globe. Likewise, it improves communication skills through constant practice there would be perfection.

Highlighting the issue of multilingualism and the question of national language in Nigeria, Green (2023) stated that Nigeria is a nation that maintains unity in diversity, and it is the largest country in West Africa with a population of over 200 million people belonging to more than 300 ethnic groups. The country comprises 36 states and Abuja, which is the Federal Capital Territory; although the estimated languages of the country cannot be precisely stated, Green contended that there are above 500 languages in Nigeria. Out of these languages, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria seems to recognise three (3) of them as national languages: viz-a-viz Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. They are referred to as the major languages while others are minor. The prominent among the minors are Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio and Tiv.

Language issues appear complex in Nigeria because of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual nature of the country. There is no doubt that Nigeria is battling the problem of having a functional national language policy due to the multiplicity of language in the setting and the dominant nature of the English language (Kolade-Ojo, 2014). The multilingual setting becomes complicated because most of the languages have different identifiable dialects. Ene (2015) affirmed that there are about 20 dialects of the Yoruba language and many more sub-dialects; 6 dialects of the Hausa language and 23 dialects of the Igbo language. Some of these languages, with many dialects, compete for supremacy due to language contact and when this happens, there is a need for language planners to come up with standardised language that will function with the current needs of the language and the reality of its existence (Fakeye, 2021).

In order to reduce, if not totally eradicate, the unusual influence the English language has on our indigenous languages, as evidenced in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), there is a need for a recognised national language or languages. Section 55 of the Constitution states that:

*“the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made”*

Section 97 of the same constitution states:

*“The business of the state Houses of Assembly may in addition to English, be conducted in one or more languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve”.*

From the above statements, it could be deduced that the English language is being given a prestigious status at the detriment of indigenous languages. Nigeria is one of the members of some international bodies and a signatory to many resolutions that ensure the protection and the promotion of indigenous languages and culture. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (Barcelona Declaration) in 1996 emphasised the need for cultural and linguistic diversity as the global linguistic goal for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but never gained UNESCO support till 2002. In addition, 21<sup>st</sup> February of every year has been set aside as the Mother Language Day, in which attention is called to the use of and the maintenance of the mother tongue (Wikipedia, 2021). Despite all this, Nigeria has not considered the issue of national language a priority.

The National Language Policy (2022) equally showed the desire to promote indigenous languages by stating that the medium of instruction from childhood to six years in primary school should be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment, and English language being taught as a subject except in Arabic schools where the medium of instruction would be Arabic language, and English language as a subject. Also, it was established in the document that English could be combined with mother tongue or language of the immediate environment as a means of instruction in junior secondary school, but students should study one of the three major Nigerian languages other than their own as a subject. For mass literacy, the mode of instruction dissemination is expected to be a native language or the language of the immediate environment, with English language being offered as a school subject. At tertiary level, every undergraduate is expected to be bilingual by learning a Nigerian language other than his/her mother tongue. Accordingly, the abstracts in students' projects are expected to be translated by the researchers into their mother tongue or language of the immediate environment. It could be observed that most of these ideas are also specified in National Policy on Education (2014). By implication, it seems Nigerians are very good at policy making, but very poor when it comes to implementing them. Most policies are documented, but they hardly see the light of the day. By implementing all these policies, indigenous languages would not only gain recognition nationally, but internationally.

The government also stated that provision of motivational drives would be made available for specialist teachers, which is yet to be implemented. It seems there is a lack of commitment and adequate supervision on the part of the government in this regard, because Nigerian schools use the English as the medium of instruction right from crèche. Parents too, especially the educated ones, do communicate with their children in English right from birth. For such children, English is the first language they come in contact with. The first indigenous language newspaper in Nigeria named "*Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba*" was established by Reverend Henry Townsend in 1859. Later, there emerged the Efik newspapers named "*Unnawa Efik and Obukpon Efik; and Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo*" for the Hausa (Ilesanmi, 2014). With the establishment of printed newspapers in indigenous languages, the missionaries succeeded in captivating the interest of Nigerians to propagate their missionary activities. This means that even the colonial masters were aware of the importance as well as the effectiveness of indigenous languages.

From 1960, that is, the year Nigeria attained its independence to date, Nigeria has not accorded indigenous languages the importance they deserve in the national language question. This probably could have been due to a general suspicion that a definite language policy might generate inter-ethnic unrest among the populace. Based on this, it appears all attempts to evolve a national language in Nigeria have proved abortive. According to Odinje and Odinje (2015), Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are not qualified to be national languages if Ferguson's 1966 criteria for national language profile are strictly applied because none of the aforementioned languages has thirty percent (30%) of the population as its indigenous speakers: 29 percent are Hausa speakers, 21 percent are Yoruba speakers, while Igbo has 18 percent. This could be the reason Umera-Okeke (2018) suggested that Nigerian pidgin, also known as Naija, should be considered as a national language because it promotes mutual co-existence among people who are ethnically heterogeneous.

Nigerian Pidgin mixes English with several local languages; therefore, the language cannot be said to belong to any tribe. This could be the reason Elugbe (1995) likened the language to a child without a father, but everybody sends him on errands. Pidgin is commonly used in communication among different groups of people. The use of Nigerian Pidgin is gaining more ground on a daily basis, be it on campuses, radio or television programmes; but it is unfortunate that the language does not have a standardised orthography. Mensah et al. (2021) published a new proposal for a working orthography, but—yet to see the light of the day. In the same vein (Lin et al., 2024) examined the concept of synthesising variation in sentiment analysis and machine translation on Pidgin. To make Pidgin functional, a novel phonological-based word synthesising framework was then proposed to cater for orthographic variation. It is hoped that with a standardised orthography for Pidgin, it would be generally acceptable as the national language.

Maureen et al. (2024) explored the impact of Pidgin and Creole languages on the development of a national language in Nigeria, and suggested the formulation of a language policy that would be inclusive, in order to take cognisance of these two languages alongside other indigenous languages. Not only taking cognisance, but also the orthographies of the languages should also be developed for effective teaching and learning to take place. This submission is in line with Chinaguh (2025), who stated that strategic language planning and inclusive policies should be put in place with emphasis on the role of language in national development. Chinaguh viewed language as a pivotal to national development. Dukeh (2025) suggested that having Pidgin as a lingua franca would showcase the creativity of Nigeria in problem-solving without any challenges, because Pidgin manages day-to-day activities while indigenous languages carry cultural values and open conversations that the English language cannot. A leaf could be borrowed from Indonesia, with more than 726 regional languages and the world's second most diverse culture and language; despite this diversity, Malay pidgin is being used as the national as well as the official language, and it is generally acceptable by the populace (Mohammad, 2018).

Adekanbi (2014) affirmed that a national language could be linked to language development because the better a country makes use of its language, the more advanced the country becomes. It connotes that the degree of the development of a country can be measured by language. For instance, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland have well-established linguistic communities and tend to live parallel to one another. The English language which is seen as the official language and a foreign language, tends to have a prestigious status over national languages, by dominating every aspect of the day-to-day activities in Nigeria. It has become a medium of inter-ethnic communication, the language of government, business and education. However, it should be realised that national development might not occur as long as English maintains its high status. Since Nigeria is independent from the British who colonised her, she should also be free from using the British language at the detriment of her national languages. The multilingual nature of the country should not be a barrier to having a standardised national language or languages. South Africa should be commended for adopting a multilingual language policy of twelve (12) official languages (Alexander, 2025). Language planners could be sent from Nigeria to South Africa to learn how they went about the selection of the 12 languages without any hitch. It would be a great assistance in choosing Nigeria's own national languages, and insight would be provided on the factors to be considered for the selection.

From all indications, Nigeria does not have a well-defined national language policy; rather, there exists a national policy for languages in education. The implementation of a national language policy becomes imperative because it would serve as a guiding factor in language use and language teaching. Therefore, there is a need for the intervention of language planners who are expected to consider the criteria for selecting a national language with the aim of uniting the populace. The selection should be carefully done because wrong a choice could affect the nation's development negatively; therefore, any language chosen should be codified with standard orthography, lexicon, grammar rules, and dictionaries so that every sub-cultural group would understand the language, having taken into consideration-of minority groups. In addition, the language should undergo elaboration; here, the vocabulary of the language would be extended to new domains by introducing new terminologies that can cope with the demands of current realities. Last but not least is-acceptability by the people, that is, people need to be convinced to accept and use the language as a means of communication (Darrin, 2016; Fakeye, 2021).

Nigeria, being a multilingual nation, should not be seen as a barrier to having a national language, but as an added advantage. According to Komolafe (2024), less than 30% of the Nigerian population can be reached using the English language. This implies that less than half of the whole populace can be communicated with effectively in English. Based on this, introducing English language to pupils right from day one in school appears to them as being in a wonderland where they are being forced to learn a new language before learning anything in the school environment. This act might lead to increase in the drop-out rate because some of them might decide not to go to school again. On the other hand, when children find themselves in a classroom with the language of the immediate environment or mother tongue being used in teaching them, they feel relaxed and learn better. It indicates that there is a great connection between language and education.

## Conclusion

It is no doubt that Nigeria is long overdue to have a functional national language after 66 years of independence. The success of having a national language begins with individual homes, especially the elites. The medium of instruction in most homes today is English; however, the mother tongue should be the first medium of instruction for any Nigerian child. Being efficient in one's mother tongue would boost the child's understanding of any new language he/she might come into contact with in the future. Teachers should be encouraged to strictly adhere to the ideas specified in the National Language Policy (2022), here it is stated that the medium of instruction from early childhood and development education to six years in primary schools should be the language of the immediate environment or the mother tongue while English should be taught as a school subject. However, it should be realized that the mother tongue may not always be the language of the immediate environment; for instance, a child born of a Yoruba family with parents living in the northern part of Nigeria, will have Yoruba as the mother tongue (L1), while Hausa (L2) would be the language of the immediate environment which no doubt gives such a child a double advantage over his/her peers living in the same environment.

Government, as a matter of urgency, should organize seminars, workshops and conferences that would involve language planners, researchers, linguists, language educators, and other stakeholders with a view to coming up with acceptable national language(s) that can meet the current demand and reality of their existence. If this is done, English would not have a domineering grip any longer. A country's national language is its pride and cultural heritage; therefore, there is a need to protect and promote the national languages.

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