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The Nigerian Pidgin English: A tool for National Integration

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Abstract

The fact that Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural speech community is no longer new. Hence, the need for a national language to foster national unity and peace has been a debate among linguistic scholars. Because of its diverse tongues, all indigenous languages (especially the "big three" - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) have been ruled out as possible solutions to Nigeria's national language problem. This paper therefore is concerned with providing sufficient facts that the Nigerian Pidgin English can contribute to the national development of Nigeria as a whole. Heedful of this, this paper adopts that the Nigerian Pidgin English is the possible language capable of providing common intelligibility among all based on the following evaluations - it is devoid of ethno political affiliation, it's grammar, syntax and phonology are purely Nigerian, it is the most proximate language among the low, middle and high class, it is being used in the media and even in literary texts. Conclusively, this paper suggests that the Nigerian Pidgin English holds the key to foster unity and national integration.

Keywords: multilingual, multicultural, national integration, Nigerian Pidgin English



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1.0 Introduction

It is a well-known fact that at the moment English language is the official language in Nigeria. However, its status as a foreign language has made it almost impossible to cater for the overwhelming needs of the ever increasing Nigeria populace. Nigeria as a multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural nation is faced with quite a number of socio-political, cultural, economic and linguistic problems to mention a few. Linguists have agreed that Nigeria has many languages spoken by its citizens. Several linguistic scholars have also given different accounts of how many languages exist in the nation. In fact, some have claimed that Nigeria has over five hundred (500) languages spoken by different ethnic groups while other claims have it that the country has between 350 - 400 different languages. As a result of its linguistic complex nature, it becomes difficult if not impossible for a proper communication system to be established and maintained in the country. Hence, the need for an independent and neutral language that can serve as a panacea for the country's development and which many can speak and understand effortlessly. For this reason, there has been a call for a national language which can act as the driving force for the nation's development and at the same time foster national peace and unity. Advocates for a national language have always argued that the multilingual nature of the Nigerian society has made English language superior over other indigenous languages especially "the big three"- Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. This has made English language adopted as the nation's official language. As a result of this adoption, government policies/businesses are conducted in English language. Also, at all levels in schools; English language is used as the language of instruction. Consequently, the language is used to pass information across to all its citizenry. The linguistic implication for this, is that, majority of Nigerians especially those at the grassroots cannot properly access these information owing to the fact that they are non-literates. Therefore, rather than serve the society positively, the English language has proven to be disadvantaged because it has failed to function as a language of wider communication. Supporting this fact, Bamgbose (1991) argued that for a language to be recognised as a national language, it must either be a language indigenous to the people and must have spread to a wider region of that populace or it must be a language of wider communication. Government on its part has ignored the vital role of harnessing a neutral language as a way of achieving national development. Rather, a language alien to the people is promoted. This has resulted in poor communication between the people and government who itself does not know the rudiments of the adopted language. Consequently, majority of the Nigerian populace are not only cut off from government business especially in areas of national development

but have become active participants in the policies of government. In this wise, following existing knowledge related to this argument, this paper adopts the Nigerian pidgin English as not only the neutral language for national integration but also as the possible language that can act as a bridge through which the different ethno-cultural, social and linguistic groups can cross to attain the main stream of a unified goal.

2.0 English Language as a National Language

The English language is no doubt one of the colonial legacies left by colonial power after Nigeria's independence. The language has also to a large extent been accorded a more envious status over other indigenous languages in the country. Many language and linguistic scholars have agreed that the English language since its emergence in Nigeria has been accorded unparalleled importance. For instance, Jowitt (1999) remarks on the attitude of Nigerians towards the English language that:

Positive attitudes to the English language was generally shared by Nigerian elites - lawyers, academics, leading journalists, bishops... during the colonial and post-colonial era... They were practitioners of highly refined English style both in speaking and in writing (15).

Thinking along the same line, Bamgbose (1991) recognises the role of English language in a multilingual nation as Nigeria as indispensable. According to him the English Language is one of the lasting legacies of the nation's colonisers. He further states that the language is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, media to mention a few. Nonetheless, despite these indispensable roles accorded the English language in Nigeria, the country seems not to be making headway in terms of development, most especially in key areas. Omachonu (2012) in his words tags the learning of the English language as a "parrot learning". The reason is, according to him learners find it difficult especially those in the field of Science and Technology to internalise the language and knowledge gained in their field like an average Japanese or Chinese. He therefore, submits that using "our own languages" for science and technology education may improve the sector better than a foreign language. In a similar opinion, Jowitt (1999) notes with dismay that, the continuous learning and use of English language in Nigeria is becoming problematic. The reason is, learners of the language are yet to acquire the required level of proficiency in the language. This problem is even more common among students who are graduates of English yet were illiterates in the major

mechanics of the language not to mention those from other fields. Therefore, in this paper, the researchers like other researchers alike advocate for the use of a neutral language – Nigerian pidgin English that would enhance vital government business especially in the areas of national development and national integration. Although not officially recognised, the Nigerian pidgin English is already a language for social interaction, commercial activities, political campaigns and also it provides an enabling environment for effortless communication among Nigerians irrespective of any class affiliations. Thus, Elugbe and Omamor (1991) argue that: "Nigerian Pidgin English should be treated as a language in its own right, with well-ordered system just like any other language in Nigeria and should therefore be accorded national and official recognition" (151).

3.0 Overview of the Nigerian Pidgin English

Several linguists have attempted to give a working definition for Pidgin. Some scholars see it as a deviant form of a standard language in which its structure, vocabulary and syntax have been reduced to a large extent. In the words of (Crystal, 2008, p.36) a "Pidgin is a language with a markedly reduced grammatical structure, lexicon and stylistic range compared to other languages and which is a native of no one." Fromkin et al (2011) on the other hand, are of the opinion that pidgin emerged when speakers of unintelligible languages have been brought in contact under socio-economic and political conditions, thereby developing a language to communicate with one another that is not native to anyone. There have been different approaches and theories, postulated to explain the emergence of pidgin, generally. These theories have been grouped into monogenetic and polygenetic theories. While monogenetic theory agree that every single pidgin has its origin form a single source the polygenetic theory argue that pidgins of different speech communities result from separate processes of creation and development (Ike 2012). Wholistically, it would be agreed that one thing is common between the two groups. Pidgin originate as a contact language.

In view of these assumptions, it can be said the Nigerian Pidgin English is a debased form of the Standard English found in Nigeria. For instance, Okechukwu (2012) opines that looking at the linguistic map of Nigeria, it would be agreed that, the Nigerian Pidgin English flourished in areas that Nigerians first made contact with the English Language in the 16th and 17th centuries. To buttress this point further, Jowitt (1999) points out that most early pidgin words reflect older English usage. He gave examples of such words in "yonder" and "quench". In a more substantial argument Mafeni (1997) is of the opinion

that the Nigerian Pidgin English has not depended solely on European languages but has widened in its scope to include major Nigerian indigenous languages. That is, it has successfully borrowed from the many varieties of local languages within Nigeria. Examples of these borrowings include among others:

“Wayo” – trick (Hausa origin)

“Obodo” – Country (Igbo origin)

“Oyinbo” – whiteman (Yoruba origin)

From the examples given above, it would be agreed that the Nigerian Pidgin English is a kind of English which has its geographic root in Nigeria. Although it is English based, it is different socio-linguistically from what is obtained from other pidgins outside the shores of Nigeria. This is because, it has the Nigerian local languages as its underlying influence and its grammar, of course, is better understood by Nigerians. Put simply, the Nigerian Pidgin English use English words but these words are structured by Nigerians to suit their socio-linguistic environments. Although the Nigerian Pidgin English has no official status but its existence is widely recognised. Virtually every class identifies with it, making it a language of solidarity among the Nigerian populace who have no other language in common. Mafeni (1997) in agreement posits that the language can be recognised as a "Tolerance Language" (TL). The language of course is not without its own setbacks. That is, the Nigerian Pidgin English is said to be informal and inferior some scholars. Some have even marked the language as the bastardisation of Standard. English as it is seen as the language of the uneducated and slaves. Despite all these setbacks, it is advertently recognised across the country as it has function at both the national and grassroots levels positively to a large extent.

4.0 Acceptance and Use of the Nigerian Pidgin English.

The use and acceptance towards a language simply implies a way of understanding how such language is used, identified with and its acceptance among a target populace. Before now, the Nigerian Pidgin English has been seen as a language of the non-literate as well as the murder of Standard English. To say the least, it has been argued that users of the Nigerian Pidgin English are those with little or no formal education. More recently, however advocates for the Nigerian Pidgin English are of the opinion that the Nigeria Pidgin English is spoken by not only the non-literate but also by elites. It has also been observed that the language is not only used in informal settings but in formal settings too.

By implication, the earlier claim by some linguists that the language is associated with slaves and non-literates seem to have no validity.

Today, the Nigerian Pidgin English enjoys patronage from many educated speakers who can use the language proficiently alongside Standard English. A large percentage of these speakers falls within the range of the Nigerian Youths that cut across various linguistic areas of the Nigerian Society. To substantiate this point, Faraclas (1996) points out that:

Well over half of the 140 million inhabitants of Nigerians are now fluent speakers of the language (NPE), making Nigeria Pidgin (NPE) the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, as well as the indigenous of African language with the largest number of speakers. Given the rapid spreads of Nigeria Pidgin (NPE) among younger Nigerians, this proportion should increase to cover over 70 to 80% by the time the present generation of children reaches adulthood.. (828).

The validity of this ascertain can be said to be true owing to the acceptance, use and vitality of the Nigeria Pidgin English especially among the teaming youths in the country and a such assumed the role of a language that reflects national identity in Nigeria.

5.0 Nigerian Pidgin English and National Integration.

This paper agrees that a pidgin is a contact language where people of diverse tongues must comprehend one another. Therefore, it would be agreed that pidgin is a language that arises to fulfil a number of restricted communicative needs among people with no common language. Following the definition of the concept of pidgin, the thesis of this paper is that the Nigerian Pidgin English is to a large extent a remedy towards achieving national integration for sustainable development and achieving national goals and objectives. It has been observed that understanding Standard English is faulty for so many reasons. For this reason, government should ensure that the Nigerian Pidgin English be incorporated into its key sectors for speedy development and active participation of the Nigerian populace. For instance, in the education sector, the Nigerian Pidgin English should be incorporated such that the language can be taught in schools while books should be written in Pidgin. This can be achieved if the Nigerian Pidgin is incorporated in the education policy of the country. After all, it is no longer news that the language has found its way among the highly educated and non-educated alike. The language therefore, if well-polished and given a chance it is not only promising but would function

well in teaching and learning in schools. Besides the national policy on education promulgated by the federal government of Nigeria in 1977 and revised in 1981 and 2004 respectively, contains a definite statement on the role of language in education. A part of that policy states that at the early stage of a child's education (primary school), the child's language of instruction should be initially the mother-tongue or the language of the child's immediate community. It therefore implies that in the absence of a local language or where it is inadequate the Nigeria Pidgin English can serve the purpose of instruction in schools. After all, the essence of a classroom instruction is to communicate effectively, hence, the appropriate language needs to be employed.

In the area of communication, the Nigerian Pidgin English has assumed a significant role especially among the diverse ethnic groups in the country. This owes to the fact that, the language has to a large extent enhanced the propagation of mass literacy campaigns in the nation. More recently, the Nigerian government has not only realised the importance of the language, it has also recognised its usefulness in helping to get closer to the masses. Such has become the language of the media – jingles, adverts, posters, campaigns, awareness, conscientization among others. In most television and radio stations, programmes and news broadcast are now aired using the Nigerian Pidgin English. In fact, the BBC now has a news service broadcast in what it calls "West African Pidgin English". In supporting the role of Nigeria Pidgin English in this aspect, (Adeshina and Butari, 2012, p.154) opines that:

"... The various broadcasting corporations have in recent years done much popularise the language by allowing its use in radio and television..."

Following this ascertain the same can be said of the entertainment industry. Infact very sensitive issues of national interest have been jokingly passed across to the people using Nigerian Pidgin English. Integrating the Nigerian Pidgin into the nation's economic system fully is will go a long in carrying its citizens along in the countries developmentat process. For instance, many of Nigeria's financial institutions have employed the use of the Nigerian Pidgin English over the years to promote their goods and services. Thus, if duly integrated, it will to a large extent ease financial businesses as many customers of these finance houses (banks, insurance and pension on house among others) are mostly the average Nigerians. Also, other sectors of the Nigerian economy likes industries, private organisations among others can market and sell their product effortlessly especially to

those who are non-literates. This fact has proven to be true as multi-national companies like MTN and their likes have effectively advertise and sell their products effectively.

As it stands today, the Nigeria Pidgin English is not only accepted but it has served as a true national symbol. This is because, the language does not have any political or cultural affiliations. Therefore it has little or no threat to national unity. Although same can be said of the Standard English. However, it does not follow that the Standard English is neutral and accepted by all. This is owing to the linguistic fact that all languages are culture bound. Simply put, the Standard English carries with it the cultural values of its owners. On the contrary, the Nigerian Pidgin English does not have any cultural affiliation rather, it is a mixture of the people's culture and a little of other foreign cultures. This makes it difficult for any region or tribe to lay claim of its ownership as it is neither a major or minor language. More importantly, by population, the language has enjoyed large numbers of speakers who understand the language fairly. Thus, integrating the language into the Nigerian System will go a long way in making its large population have a sense of belonging. After all, it is a language indigenous to Nigerians.

In terms of language development, of all the languages available in Nigeria, only three (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) languages are recognised as major languages. This makes other minor languages have little or no recognition. This disparity among the different languages in Nigeria is either based on political or numerical strengths. The linguistic implication of this, is that most indigenous languages grow up speaking one or more indigenous languages alongside English and or Pidgin English. If therefore, made a functional part of the Nigerian System and develop adequately, the language stands a good chance of taking the nation out of its quagmire and possibly destroy the "tower of Babel" bedeviling the nation as mentioned in Ike (1998).

6.0 Conclusion

For the Nigerian nation to remain indivisible, interact freely in all areas and achieve a common and unified goal and objective, the Nigerian Pidgin English provides a good level playing ground for all Nigerians. The integration of the language into the Nigerian overall system gives hope that every citizen will be able to contribute their quota to the development of the nation. This because the language will serve as a source of power, development and a unifying force among the diverse tongues in the nation Nigeria. Heedful of all its potentials, this paper takes a stand that if the Nigerian Pidgin English is integrated into the nations system will encourage national development. If other African

countries like Tanzania can achieve this goal, the Nigerian Nation can do better as it is the “The Giant of Africa”.

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