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LANGUAGE ATTITUDES TOWARDS NIGERIAN PIDGIN

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Abstract
This study investigated language attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin, a widely spoken lingua franca in Nigeria. Despite its pervasive use in informal communication, media, and popular culture, Nigerian Pidgin often faces negative perceptions as a non-standard or "inferior" form of English. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews with undergraduate students and working adults across urban and semi-urban regions. Findings reveal a complex attitude spectrum: while many respondents appreciate Nigerian Pidgin for its expressiveness, cultural identity, and accessibility, others associate it with low social status and limited educational or professional competence. The study highlights the need for greater recognition of Nigerian Pidgin as a legitimate linguistic resource in education, media, and governance. Implications for language policy and sociolinguistic research are discussed.

Keywords: Nigerian Pidgin, language attitudes, sociolinguistics, language perception, multilingualism

INTRODUCTION

Language attitudes play a critical role in shaping linguistic behavior, language maintenance, and policy. Nigerian Pidgin, also known as "Naija" or "Broken English," functions as a lingua franca across Nigeria's multiethnic society. It bridges communication gaps among speakers of different indigenous languages, offering an accessible mode of expression in informal and semi-formal settings. Despite its widespread usage, Nigerian Pidgin has historically been stigmatized as a non-standard form of English, often associated with lower education levels or rural identity.

Understanding language attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin is crucial for sociolinguistic research, language planning, and education policy. Positive attitudes can enhance its legitimacy, while negative perceptions may lead to language marginalization and loss of cultural capital. This study explores the spectrum of attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin, examining factors influencing perception such as age, education, social context, and media exposure.

Literature Review

The Sociolinguistic Context of Nigerian Pidgin

Nigerian Pidgin has evolved as a contact language, blending elements of English with indigenous Nigerian languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. Scholars like Faraclas (1996) and Elugbe&Omamor (1991) emphasize that Pidgin serves not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of identity and cultural solidarity. Its informal nature allows for creativity, humor, and expressive communication across diverse social groups. Language attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin (NP) have attracted sustained scholarly attention due to the language's complex sociolinguistic status in Nigeria's multilingual environment. Studies consistently reveal that attitudes

towards NP are **ambivalent, dynamic, and socially conditioned**, reflecting broader ideological, historical, and identity-related factors.

One major trend in the literature is the **coexistence of positive and negative attitudes** toward Nigerian Pidgin. On one hand, NP is widely recognized as a **lingua franca** that facilitates communication across Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups. Its accessibility and neutrality make it a unifying medium, especially in informal and urban contexts. Research shows that NP has expanded beyond its traditional domains into media, music, politics, and digital communication, thereby increasing its functional load and social relevance.

However, despite its widespread use, many scholars note the persistence of **negative attitudes**, particularly in formal and institutional settings. These attitudes are often rooted in colonial linguistic ideologies that privilege Standard English over indigenous or non-standard varieties. For instance, studies indicate that Nigerian Pidgin is frequently perceived as "inferior," "corrupt," or "uneducated," which limits its acceptance in education, governance, and official communication. This negative perception has been identified as a major obstacle to its standardization and possible adoption as a national language.

Another important dimension in the literature is the role of **language and identity**. Nigerian Pidgin serves as a powerful marker of **social identity, solidarity, and cultural belonging**. Speakers often use it to signal informality, group membership, and shared experience. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language choice—including the use of NP—reflects speakers' attitudes, values, and intentions within specific communicative contexts. This aligns with the view that language attitudes are not merely cognitive but are also socially constructed and context-dependent.

Recent studies have further emphasized the **fluid and discursive nature of language attitudes**. Rather than being fixed, attitudes toward NP are shaped by ongoing social interactions and discourses. For example, research on diaspora communities shows that perceptions of Nigerian Pidgin oscillate between appreciation for its accessibility and criticism based on perceived lack of prestige. Similarly, attitudes toward NP in media contexts, such as its use by international broadcasters, reveal tensions between its growing global visibility and lingering stigma .

In addition, the literature highlights the influence of **education, social class, and exposure** on language attitudes. Individuals with higher levels of formal education or those socialized in English-dominant environments are more likely to exhibit negative attitudes toward NP, often associating it with low prestige. Conversely, younger speakers and those in urban settings tend to display more positive attitudes, reflecting shifting linguistic norms and increasing acceptance of NP in popular culture and digital spaces.

Overall, the literature suggests that language attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin are **complex and evolving**, shaped by historical legacies, sociopolitical structures, identity considerations, and changing communicative practices. While negative perceptions persist, especially in formal domains, there is growing recognition of NP's communicative value and cultural significance, indicating a gradual shift toward greater acceptance.

Language Attitudes and Their Importance

Language attitudes refer to evaluative judgments people make about languages or dialects, which may influence usage, policy, and intergroup relations (Garrett, 2010). Positive attitudes often correlate with language vitality, maintenance, and acceptance in formal domains, while negative attitudes can lead to stigmatization and language shift.

Attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin

Previous studies show ambivalent perceptions of Nigerian Pidgin. Emenanjo (2005) notes that urban youth often embrace Pidgin as a marker of modernity and identity, whereas older or more formally educated individuals may perceive it as "uneducated" speech. Media representations also shape these attitudes, with Pidgin featured in comedy, music, and social media, enhancing its visibility yet sometimes reinforcing stereotypes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey, while qualitative insights were gained from semi-structured interviews.

Participants

The study sampled 200 participants, comprising undergraduate students (n=120) and working adults (n=80) across urban centers in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Enugu. Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling to capture diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds.

Instruments

1. **Survey Questionnaire:** Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of Nigerian Pidgin in education, media, workplace, and social interaction.
2. **Interviews:** Open-ended questions exploring participants' personal attitudes, experiences, and perceived social implications of using Nigerian Pidgin.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify trends. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, highlighting recurring perceptions and attitudes.

Results and Findings

Quantitative Findings

- **Positive Perceptions:** 68% of participants reported that Nigerian Pidgin is useful for social bonding and informal communication.
- **Negative Perceptions:** 54% associated it with lower education or social class.
- **Media Influence:** 73% acknowledged that exposure to Pidgin in music, comedy, and social media influenced their acceptance of the language.

Qualitative Findings

- **Identity and Belonging:** Many respondents described Pidgin as a language that "belongs to all Nigerians" and strengthens cultural connection.
- **Professional Stigma:** Some participants expressed reluctance to use Pidgin in formal or workplace contexts, fearing negative judgment.
- **Adaptability:** Pidgin is appreciated for its flexibility, creativity, and humor in communication, especially among younger speakers.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Nigerian Pidgin elicits ambivalent attitudes shaped by social, educational, and generational factors. While its role as a unifying language is recognized, negative perceptions

persist, particularly regarding professionalism and education. These results align with previous studies (Faraclas, 1996; Emenanjo, 2005) and suggest that language planning initiatives should consider integrating Pidgin into formal and media contexts, thereby reducing stigma and enhancing linguistic inclusivity.

Conclusion

Nigerian Pidgin occupies a complex sociolinguistic space: simultaneously celebrated as a marker of identity and marginalized as non-standard speech. Positive attitudes dominate among urban youth and media-savvy populations, while older or highly educated individuals often hold conservative perceptions. Recognizing and valuing Nigerian Pidgin in education, media, and policy can foster linguistic inclusivity, cultural pride, and social cohesion.

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