

Standardization of Nigerian Pidgin in social media

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Abstract

Nigerian Pidgin has come a long way since its inception through European trade contact to this period. It has evolved in vocabulary and spellings over the years. This paper examines the standardization of Nigerian Pidgin in social media to determine if the same codification system is generally used in social media. A descriptive research design method was used for the study. Data was gotten from three blogs that use Nigerian Pidgin to ascertain if Nigerian Pidgin is standardized on social media. The findings show that Nigerian Pidgin is not yet standardized despite linguists' efforts to standardize it. Also, findings show that negative attitude towards Nigerian Pidgin is its most powerful setback. It is therefore suggested that government should institute a language planning agency for corpus and status planning for the standardization of Nigerian Pidgin since it is the only indigenous language in Nigeria that is used all over the country as a lingua franca.

Keywords: *Nigerian Pidgin, social media, language standardization, language planning*

Introduction

Nigerian Pidgin (NP) originated and developed its ‘standard’ forms during the period of 300 years that elapsed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Jowitt, 1991). The Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit the coasts of Nigeria especially the areas now known as Niger Delta. Their sole purpose was trading which started around 1469AD (Esizimotor & Egbokhare, 2012). According to Ryder cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p.3),

The Portuguese discovered that the goldmining Akan tribes of Ghana preferred or even insisted on receiving part of the price of their gold in slaves. Unable to procure the required number of slaves between Portugal and the Gold Coast, and unwilling to commit the impolitic act of seizing the local inhabitants, the Portuguese went farther along the coast in search of slaves.

This contact with the Portuguese for an extended period of time introduced the Portuguese-based Pidgin in the Niger Delta region. Since the region was made up of diverse linguistic communities like Annang, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Ijaw, Isoko, Itsekiri, with no common language of communication, it was relatively easy for many of them to learn the Portuguese-based pidgin. After the Portuguese left the region, the Dutch traded at the Eastern end of the region for half a century followed by the French who visited the region intermittently till even after the English arrived in 1650AD to take effective control of trade in the region (Esizimotor & Egbokhare, 2012). Like the Portuguese, the first interest of the English people was slave trade. However, with prolonged contact, their initial trade interest metamorphosed to religion and then to education and finally to colonialism. With this came a change in

the Portuguese-based pidgin which evolved into an English-based one with the majority of its vocabulary drawn from the superstrate – English, with Portuguese being the origin of such common words as *pikin* (child), *palaver* (trouble), *sabi* (to know). Different Nigerian languages also influenced the vocabulary of Nigerian Pidgin albeit in a minor way. Some examples are:

Hausa: *suya* (a spicy grilled meat), *koboko* (horse whip), *gworo* (cola nut)

Igbo: *obodo* (land/country), *ogbanje* (water spirit/changeling)

Yoruba: *ashawo* (prostitute), *shakara* (show off), *shey* (hope), *adire* (tie and dye)

Edo: *kpekere* (plantain chips), *okada* (motor-bike), *ororo* (vegetable oil)

The syntax of Nigerian Pidgin has been heavily influenced by the substrate- the indigenous Nigerian languages, especially the languages of Southern Nigeria for example, the absence of distinction between masculine and feminine pronouns. Today, Nigerian Pidgin has become commonly spoken among the multilingual populations of the country irrespective of class or educational status. Faraclas (2004) claims that over half of the 140 million inhabitants of Nigeria are now fluent speakers of NP making it the most widely spoken language in Nigeria as well as the indigenous African language with the largest number of speakers. NP is no longer seen as the language of the illiterate and semi-literate population. Akande (2008) cited in Akande & Salami (2010, p. 70) noted that “the sociolinguistic reality in Nigeria today is such that NP is spoken by university graduates, professors, lawyers and journalists”. It is also used in offices and other formal settings.

Nigerian pidgin in the social media space

Digital revolution has caused social media to become a powerful communication medium. Social media's influence has given rise to a different genre of communication, driving contemporary language evolution. The ease of access enables information to spread faster, reaching a wider audience in a way that was previously impossible. The use of Nigerian Pidgin in social media is not only a reflection of linguistic diversity and cultural identity, but it also challenges dominant linguistic norms. Social media platforms accelerate the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin with new words and expressions emerging through online interactions. Innovative expressions such as *kpai*, *opueh*, rapidly gain popularity through social media. Akhmedova (2023, p.52) notes that “many subcultures and communities on social media actively shape language through the coining of new terms and expressions unique to their experiences. This phenomenon fosters a sense of identity and belonging and often leads to the mainstream adoption of specialized language”.

Standardization of Nigerian Pidgin

As Emenanjo (1990, p.88) aptly puts it, “every Nigerian language needs a language planning agency (LPA) to succeed in its language engineering programme”. The role of this agency in a language includes standardization of orthography, expansion of the vocabulary of the language to accommodate all the words in English, and production of material in the standard language. Elugbe and Omamar (1991, pp. 113-115) give three options for reducing Nigerian Pidgin to writing. The first option is to reflect the Englishness of individual vocabulary items by simply reproducing them in their English spelling; words not of English

origin would have to be written using principles that are radically different from those involved in English spelling. The problem with this suggestion is that the reader of such Nigerian Pidgin writing must first be literate in English, which should not be if Nigerian Pidgin is a language in its own right. It also gives the erroneous impression that Nigerian Pidgin is a deviant form of English. Moreover, the orthography of Nigerian Pidgin would become more erratic than that of English. The English language orthography is considered erratic because the spelling of words often do not align with how they are pronounced and there are many inconsistent patterns between letters and sounds. This is as a result of historical influences, borrowing from other languages and sound changes over time. Now, if Nigerian Pidgin is to combine this already erratic English orthography with another orthography, perhaps a phonetic one, it would become more erratic than that of English because different orthographies would establish conflicting rules for representing sounds and meanings which would make the language seem illogical.

The second option is to use a purely phonetic alphabet. This writing system indicates systematic phonetic features and uses special symbols and diacritics. This also has its pitfall since it cannot be read by the general public but by specialists such as linguists. The third option is to attempt a new orthography of its own based on the acceptance that Nigerian Pidgin is a language in its own right, independent of English.

Todd (1974), cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p.119), rejects the use of Nigerian Pidgin in a written medium for the following reasons:

- 1) Preparing materials in pidgin might involve great financial commitments.

- 2) The users of the material might suffer some (unspecified) psychological damage.
- 3) Deciding on the orthography would be difficult since to base it on the standard English orthography is to give the false impression that it is an inferior, dialectal variant of English and to use what she calls a tailor-made (i.e. modern) orthography is to teach “a set of spelling conventions which will inevitably clash with those of Standard English”.

However, Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p.120) counter these claims by saying that:

An English-based pidgin is well able to borrow any word from English and adapt it in all ways – phonologically, grammatically, and lexically – to suit its needs...In developing Nigerian languages to enable them cope with the demands of modern education, we have designed orthographies, prepared teaching materials, and compiled metalanguages for technical aspects. All these can and should be done for pidgin.

They claim that there is no need to be unduly worried for the effects on the learners who would use the pidgin orthography alongside an English one since a sizeable percentage of school children first become familiar with a spoken as well as written forms of a Nigerian language before being introduced to English. They further note that the problem of conflict between Nigerian Pidgin orthography and that of English will only arise if the orthography designed for Nigerian Pidgin is “a cosmetic alteration of Standard

English orthography”. They therefore advocate that the orthography for Nigerian Pidgin should be tailor-made based on the principle that Nigerian Pidgin is a Nigerian language. Although it is true that many school children acquire a Nigerian language as their mother tongue before being introduced to English, it is however untrue that they learn the written forms of these languages before English, as a quick survey in schools shows that many Nigerian children with indigenous languages as their mother tongue can hardly write them.

Lack of standardization is a major problem for the non-recognition of Nigerian Pidgin by government. This problem, as noted by Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p. 144), is because, “what should be its greatest claim – namely that it belongs to no single ethnic group – becomes a handicap as it has no ethnic group to pursue its cause”. There is an inconsistency in the orthography of Nigerian Pidgin among writers and even in the writing of same writer as exemplified in Aig-Imoukhuede’s poem “One Wife for One Man” cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991, p. 114):

My fader before my fader get him wife borku

E no get equality palaver; he live well

Here, both the first and ante-penultimate words in the second line are a reference to ‘my fader before my fader’ (grandfather) but the spelling of the pronoun is both ‘e’ and ‘he’ in the same line.

There have been suggestions for the alphabet of Nigerian Pidgin. Horsfall (1981), cited in Elugbe and Omamar (1991) suggests the use of diagraphs such as ‘sh’ for ʃ, ‘ch’ for tʃ, and ‘j’ for dʒ. Mafeni (1971) suggests the adoption of an indigenous orthography similar to that of Yoruba or Igbo. This according to him would show the phonetic differences between English and NP

and establish it as an independent language. He identifies seven vowel phonemes:

Vowel phonemes	phonemic	orthography	English Equivalent
i	/bit/	bit	beat
e	/pén/	pén	pain
ɛ	/bɛt/	bet	bet
a	/hát/	hát	heart
ɔ	/hɔt/	hót	hot
o	/tót/	tót	carry
u	/fút/	fút	foot

There are ongoing efforts among Nigerian linguists to see that Nigerian Pidgin is standardized and developed, especially when the Naija Langwwej Akedemi (NLA) held its first conference in July 2009 and proposed a harmonized orthography for writing the

language. Among the major outcomes of the conference was first, the adoption of ‘Naija’ as the name for the language that was hitherto known as Nigerian Pidgin. This is because it has creolised in some parts of the country and the term ‘pidgin’ has helped to encourage derogatory connotations about the language, hence the term Naija espouses the language’s distinct identity as a language in its own right as well as the Nigerian spirit. Secondly, the development of a standard orthography that provides systematic guidelines or consistent rules for spelling and writing in the language (Ofulue & Esizimotor, 2010). Naija orthography has a total of twenty eight (28) alphabet, made up of twenty three single letters and five diagraphs which directly correspond to the sounds of the language. They are - a, b, ch, d, e, f, g, gb, h, i, j, k, kp, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, sh, t, u, v, w, y, z,zh. They illustrate these letters and their sounds with the following examples:

S/N	IPA	SNO	Example	Gloss
1	/a/	a	akada	educated
2	/b/	b	buk	book
3	/tʃ/	ch	chukuchuku	thorns
4	/d/	d	dodo	fried ripe plantain
5	/e/	e	egen	again
6	/ɛ/ ɛ̃	eg		egg

7	/f/	f	faya	fire
8	/g/	g	gragra	hastiness
9	/gb/	gb	gbagbati	troublesome
10	/h/	h	hama	hammer
11	/i/	i	insaid	inside
12	/dʒ/	j	juju	charm
13	/k/	k	kaikai	local gin
14	/kp/	kp	kpangolo	metal container
15	/l/	l	lait	light
16	/m/	m	mama	mother
17	/n/	n	nak	to hit/knack
18	/o/	o	ogogoro	gin
19	/ɔ/	ɔ	ɔtɔɔtɔ	muddiness
20	/p/	p	pikin	child

21	/r/	r	rapa	wrapper
22	/s/	s	sup	soup
23	/ʃ/	sh	shek	shake
24	/t/	t	tolotolo	turkey
25	/u/	u	una	you (plural)
26	/v/	v	video	video
27	/w/	w	waka	walk
28	/j/ ɲ	y	yansh	buttocks
29	/z/	z	zink	metal roofing sheet
30	/ʒ/	zh	mezho	measure

They suggest that compound words made up of words of two syntactic categories (where one word modifies the other) should be hyphenated. Examples

strong-hed (stubborn)

bush-mit (wild meat)

In reduplication, where the same item is repeated, they should be written together as a word, e.g. *krɔkrɔ* (rashes), *yamayama* (rubbish). However, where the same item is reduplicated to intensify the meaning of the other, the items should be written as separate words, e.g. – *bad bad* (extremely bad), *krai krai* (always crying).

Nigerian Pidgin has come a long way from the days as a contact language to this present era. It has evolved in its codification with different varieties. Efforts have been made by linguists to standardize Nigerian Pidgin even though it has received no official recognition by the government. The official stance on it remains negative although it is used by all demographics in the nation. This research therefore seeks to find out the result of these linguists' efforts on Nigerian Pidgin as it is used on social media.

Here, the target is to provide ample elucidation about how much the Nigerian Pidgin has been standardized. This would be attended to by purposive sampling from interactions on three Facebook blogs in which Nigerian Pidgin is used: BBC Pidgin News, Football in Pidgin, and Law in Pidgin. Two posts have been picked from each of the blogs making them a total of six posts.

Theoretical framework

The Haugen's model of language standardization is used. He proposes four stages of language standardization:

1. Selection: In this stage, a particular dialect or language is chosen over others to be the standard form. The selection is often influenced by socio-political factors.
2. Codification: Once a dialect or language is selected, it is codified. This means the establishment of rules of grammar, spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary. This

often results in the creation of dictionaries and grammar books.

3. Implementation: In this stage, the standardized language is promoted and used in various domains such as education, government, media, and literature. It becomes the language of instruction in schools and the official state language.
4. Elaboration: In this stage, the language is further developed and enriched. New words and phrases are brought into the language to meet the changing needs of the society. The language gains prestige and acceptance, and is used in a wider range of social and professional contexts.

The data for the study have been examined by recourse to these stages.

The data and analysis

Extract 1



Pope Francis don tell Catholics to pray for am as e kontinu to receive treatment for hospital.

Di leader of di Catholic Church dey suffer double pneumonia and im bin no fit deliver di traditional Angelus prayer by imself again today.

For one message wey di Pope bin write, im tok say im dey "confidently kontinu" im treatment for Rome Gemelli Hospital.

Dis dey come afta di Vatican tok on Saturday say di condition of 88 years old Pope Francis dey 'critical'.

For im message on Sunday, di Pope thank di doctors and health workers for di hospital and dose wey send messages.

"Thank you for dis closeness, and for di prayers of comfort I don receive from all ova di world. I trust you all to di intercession of Mary, and I dey ask una to pray for me," di Pope tok for im message.

Extract 2



Leader of di proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (Ipub) Nnamdi Kanu para as court adjourn im case until further notice

Kanu dey appear bifor Justice Binta Nyako again in company of im lawyers for Abuja.

But di judge adjourn di case afta di Ipub leader maintain say im no go stand trial bifor her.

Kanu insist say make Justice Nyako remove herself from im case.



Extract 4



LAW IN PIDGIN · Follow

13h · 🌐

Barr. Hope, our First Daughter buy our father compound now she say make we pack from our papa house.

Wetin happen be say our papa marryyy 3 wife. Na her mama be first wife. She dey 10 years when my mama come. From there, wahala everywhere. My papa come say make she and her mam@ go. Her mama come rent one room for our street. As all of us come big, my papa come sell our compound for 40M. And we been no gree but him say house na him own. As him sell am him come give us small small thing but him no give our senior sister.

So, we and person wey buuy am come dey get issue the man say make we give am him 40M back and the moni don finish.

So my younger brother wey be the only person wey dey good with that our elder sister come go tell am wetin dey happen. She call the man wey buy the property. She come bu'y am back for 52M. Collect all the documents.

The problem now be say she don give all of us 3 months to comot from the compound. Na only that my brother she no tell to comot.

For our place, daughter no dey inherit pr0perty.

How she go tell us to pack from our family house? Even our papa, she no even pity am. Now the man say him dey go back village next week. We no get moni to rent house.

We no get where to go except village.

Me: make una enter night bus dey go village 000.

Oya check comment section make you hear wetin law talk 🙌

Extract 5



Football in Pidgin

1d · 🌐

By di time food wey Eric Chelle dey cook for Nigerians go done eh, everybody go dey fear to play against Super Eagles.

Since dem carry this man as Super Eagles coach everything just dey active, our Super Eagles social media pages wey dem dey post once in two years don dey active, players dey active, coach sef dey active, Nigerians gb*la sef dey active.

Eric Chelle just dey travel dey watch NPFL matches Infact e get time wey e travel go dey watch our players wey dey Europe.

If this man cook finish di only thing wey fit bEat Nigeria na rain and I feel like crying for Rwanda and Zimbabwe because dem go too regret why dem leave volleyball dey play football.

Our Worldcup qualifiers na 21 and 24 March 2025 so make our opponents bring bags wey dem go use pack goals.



Extract 6



Football in Pidgin

7h

Man United don finally turn their fans to kolo people ooo 😊

Oya meet Theunitedstrand di Man United fan wey tok say e no go barb hin till Manchester United win 5 games in a row. 🤔

Our brother start di challenge on di 6th October 2024 and na 5th March 2025 be this and Man United never still win 5 games in a row for am.

People like Honourable footballinpidgin don advise am for comment section make e leave Man United go barb hin hair before wld an! mals go begin live there because Man United no fit do am this season but di bobo still no hear, e say e go carry am till Man United win di 5 games in a row.

Some tok say dem no know which one wey hard between Man United to win 5 games in a

row and Arsenal to win Champions league.

My people abeg which year you think say this Man United fan go barb hin hair?



The extent to which the Nigerian Pidgin been standardized

In excerpt 1, BBC News Pidgin uses ‘don’ for ‘done’, ‘di’ for ‘the’, ‘e’ for ‘he’, ‘im’ for ‘him’/‘his’, ‘bin’ for ‘been’, ‘tok’ for ‘talk’. Also, the spellings of some words were changed e.g- kontinu for ‘continue’, ‘afta’ for ‘after’. However, some other words were left with their English spellings like- message, receive, hospital, treatment, double, deliver, prayer, today, e.tc. Again, some expressions cannot be considered Nigerian Pidgin but rather English. E.g., ‘I trust you all to di intercession of Mary...’. This is a case of decreolization.

In excerpt 2, there is an inconsistency in BBC News Pidgin's use of *imsef*. Whereas it uses *imsef* in excerpt 1 to refer to the Pope, it uses *herself* in excerpt 2 to refer to Justice Nyako. There is also the modernization of the English orthography 'before' to 'bifor' whereas some other words were left in their English version. Again, there is the use of a word that cannot be considered part of the Nigerian Pidgin lexicon which is 'insist'. This is another case of decreolization.

In excerpt 3, Law in Pidgin uses the English spellings of all English words. Words like- talk, them, been, that, the, him, retain their English spellings. However, its use of language is more original than BBC's.

In excerpt 4, Law in Pidgin maintains its use of English spellings except for the case of 'money' it wrote as 'moni'. Also, the phrase 'father compound' should be 'papa compound' in Nigerian Pidgin. It uses *father* and *papa* interchangeably. The arrangement of words in the phrase- Na only that my brother she no tell to comot- should be written "na only that my brother she no say make im comot".

In excerpt 5, Football in Pidgin uses a common Nigerian Pidgin symbolism to pass a point. The use of 'everybodi' for 'everybody' does not tally with the spelling of other words in the post which were spelt in English such as time, against, active, travel, watch, volleyball, football, regret, pack, etc. The expression "I feel like crying" is not Nigerian Pidgin but could be seen as a case of code mixing.

In excerpt 6, the 'their' is used in place of the NP word for showing possession 'dem'. It uses another variation of *him/im* – *hin*. Here, there is also no particular standard orthography. Although the spellings of most words are rendered in their English

version, the spelling of two words – ‘tok’ for ‘talk’ and ‘di’ for ‘the’ are given phonetic orthography.

Even though Nigerian Pidgin has not been selected officially to be the standard form in line with Haugen’s model of language standardization, it is the de facto lingua franca of the country. Its choice as a lingua franca is influenced by the multilingual nature of the country and the need to have a common language with which everyone- educated and non-educated- can communicate in.

Even though various linguists have made efforts to codify Nigerian Pidgin, the data above shows that their efforts have not yielded the desired result. The data shows that there is no standard codification system especially in the area of spellings and vocabulary. There are discrepancies in the spellings of some words, and some constructions which are obviously English are passed off as Nigerian Pidgin although this could be considered a case of decreolization.

In the implementation stage, Nigerian Pidgin has been promoted and used in various domains. It is used in the media for news broadcast, advertisements and programmes on both radio and television. Government also uses it in grass root dissemination of information. There is a handful of literature in Nigerian Pidgin. However, it has not been made the medium of instruction in education, even though the National Policy on Education proposes the use of the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community in the primary schools. Nigerian Pidgin is the language of the immediate community in some places especially the Niger-Delta region but this policy has not been implemented with regards to Nigerian Pidgin.

In the context of elaboration, Nigerian Pidgin continues to develop. New words and phrases are constantly brought into the language to meet the changing needs of the society.

Conclusion

Nigerian Pidgin is the de facto lingua franca in Nigeria. It is the most widely used and understood language for communication across different ethnic groups and regions in Nigeria. It is more commonly spoken than English in everyday communication.

Linguists have made several efforts to standardize NP. Naija Langwej Akademi for instance rebranded NP as ‘Naija’ to promote a positive view of the language and developed a standard orthography. Linguists have also created literary materials and translated religious texts like the Bible into NP. Despite these efforts of linguists to standardize Nigerian Pidgin and the fact that it is the de facto lingua franca in Nigeria, the data above shows that little has been achieved in terms of its standardization. Although NP has achieved a more positive view in recent times, a standard orthography has not been achieved. One of the reasons for this is government’s nonchalant attitude to it.

The lack of standardization has done more harm to Nigerian Pidgin because it results in seeing the language as an informal or colloquial language. So, even though Nigerian Pidgin is a common language of the people, no recognition has been given it officially because of its non-standardization.

Recommendations

- Government should fund such language planning agencies like National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) for proper language engineering and planning of Nigerian Pidgin. This agency will be charged with the codification and standardization of Nigerian Pidgin. It will also be in charge of its corpus and status planning.

- Government should make a policy for Nigerian Pidgin to be used as a medium of instruction in the primary school especially in places where it is the language of the immediate community. This will enable the children to settle down psychologically and will also foster effective learning in the initial years.
- Government should also fund the production of instructional materials in Nigerian Pidgin.
- Preparation for the use of Nigerian pidgin should be incorporated into the teacher training programmes as “mere ability to speak a language does not make one a teacher in that language” (Gani-Ikilama, 1990, p. 226).

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