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**Page 57 – 63**

## **ENGAGING THE NIGERIAN PIDGIN ENGLISH AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN POST COVID-19 NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Nearly all (if not all) the countries of the world were caught unawares when COVID-19 first surfaced in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019 and turned the table against the very many sectors of the world. The sectors that largely felt the impact of the pandemic include education, health and the world economy. The gross effect of the pandemic on most sectors is that the status quo in their approaches to issues changed: things no longer remained the same. This paper is descriptive and it examines how, through language planning efforts inspired by thoughts from Adam Smith's Theory of Specialization, the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and Nigerian indigenous languages (NILs) could be engaged to turn the economic situation of the country around and thereby engender economic development after the harrowing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper discusses the linguistic situation of the country, the impact of COVID-19 on the economies of the world, the language policy and planning efforts of the government with the roles assigned the various languages at different levels and post COVID-19 suggestions for engaging the NPE and NILs for economic activities in the country, among others. The paper asserts that language has economic value which can be harnessed with language planning in multilingual societies like Nigeria to engender economic development.*

**Keywords:** Nigerian Indigenous Languages, Nigerian Pidgin English, Economic Development, COVID-19, Language Planning

## **Introduction**

COVID-19 pandemic, being the most recent in the history of pandemics in the world, came when least expected and has taken its tolls on many sectors, leaving them either adversely affected or positively modified in their mode of operations. Moore (2021) describes COVID-19 as 'the fifth documented pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic' which has had far-reaching consequences on the healthcare, economic and social life of the world. The pandemic ravaged the world, Nigeria inclusive.

Writing on the effects of COVID-19 pandemic in daily life, Haleem, Javaid & Vaishya (2020) classified the consequences of the pandemic under three sub headings namely healthcare, economic and social. On the economic scene which is central to this paper, the economic effects of the pandemic include slowing down of the manufacturing of essential goods, disruption of the supply chain of products, losses in national and international business, poor cash flow in the market and significant slowing down in the revenue growth. At the level of healthcare, there are challenges in the diagnosis, quarantine and treatment of suspected or confirmed cases as well as high burden of the functioning of the existing medical system, among other healthcare effects of the pandemic.

As the advent and confirmation of the pandemic had serious effects on healthcare and economy so also did it have on the social life of people. For instance, Haleem *et al* (2020) identified cancellation or postponement of large-scale sports and tournaments, social distancing, postponement of examinations and closure of public places such as hotels, restaurants and worship centres, among others as some of the effects of the pandemic on the social life of people.

Ajibo (2020) identified the effects of the pandemic on the socio-economic wellbeing of Nigerians as including the shutdown of the Nigerian economy and transportation, disruption of social and religious life of Nigerians as well as other challenges occasioned by the pandemic. All of these effects are challenges which the whole world has to find ways of coping with after the demystification of the pandemic through vaccines and other non-pharmaceutical preventive measures. Although the effects of COVID-19 pandemic may be negative in some instances, it has brought a lot of positive innovations into the practice of teaching and learning globally. E-learning and virtual meetings become more popular and now thrive more than the situation in the pre-COVID-19 era. The re-opening of schools after lockdown occasioned by the pandemic in many countries gave rise to 'the adoption of e-learning in educational institutions, especially the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)' (Olajide, 2020). This is a benefit creditable to the outbreak of the pandemic.

According to the Honourable Minister of Health, Dr Osagie Ehanire, the first case of COVID-19 to be reported in Nigeria was discovered on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 (Federal Ministry of Health, 2020). Since the confirmation of the novel case, thousands of other cases have been discovered and the Nigerian government has put a lot of measures in place to curtail the spread of the pandemic, although not without the various effects it has had on the economy as well as other sectors of the country.

## **The Language Situation of Nigeria**

Even though the European traders first came into the country in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the entity addressed as Nigeria today was not so addressed until the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of the country. The entity used to be made up of independent groups that had their indigenous languages. (Akinjobi, 2004). With this, we can see that there is

diversity of languages which have been classified in many ways by different authors. There have been different submissions on the number of languages in the country. For instance, Ogunmodimu (2015) describes the linguistic situation of the country as ‘a complex multi-layered mosaic of exogenous and indigenous languages’ made up of English, French and Arabic as exogenous languages, over 521 indigenous languages and one neutral language, the English pidgin. Although there is no document that is branded as the language policy document of Nigeria, statements describing the roles that languages are expected to play in the national life of the nation are spelt out in the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The English language became the official language of the country during the colonial era and still thrives as such today because of factors such as multilingualism, multi-ethnicity and people’s negative attitude to the Nigerian indigenous languages (Dada, 2010; Ogunmodimu, 2015).

Owolabi (2012) subscribes to the adoption of English as a non-partisan linguistic code for the benefit of all in a multilingual polity since no indigenous language can be used as a national language. Reasons put forward for the adoption of English as the country’s lingua franca include fear of political domination, lack of infrastructures such as teachers and books for any selected language and lack of political will, among other factors. The English language became the language of administration in Nigeria when the colonialists took over the administration of the country. In 1882, the language gained the status of the language of education through the promulgation of a law that made English the language of instruction at schools (Ogunmodimu, 2015) and ever since, it has become the one prominently used in many sectors of the country. For instance, English is Nigeria’s lingua franca. It became the language of wider communication mainly because of the linguistic plurality of the country which does not allow for an indigenous national language. Other roles assigned the language in Nigeria include its use as language of the mass media, language of politics, language of the judiciary, language of commerce, trade and business transaction as well as language of international relations. In all of these, the importance or relevance of the Nigerian indigenous languages and the Nigerian Pidgin English is downplayed.

### **Nigerian Indigenous Languages and Nigerian Pidgin English**

The roles the National Policy on Education assigns the indigenous languages include using it for teaching at the lower primary schools as contained in Section 1, 8g of the document that:

every child shall be taught in the mother tongue or language of the immediate community for the first four years of basic education. In addition, it is expected that every child shall learn one Nigerian language.

Mother tongues are endogenous languages which serve societal or communal uses (Adegbite, 2004). In his typology of languages, Adegbite (2004) classifies the languages in Nigeria as ‘Mother tongues’ including all indigenous languages; ‘Second language’ which is English and ‘Special languages’ which are ‘indigenous languages other than speakers’ mother tongues.’

Another document that confers some special usage on the NILs is the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria where it is stated in Sections 55 and 97 that the indigenous languages can be used respectively for the conduct of the business of the National Assembly and the respective states Houses of Assembly. There is no mention of the Nigerian Pidgin English either in the National Policy on Education or the constitution, not to talk of its being

assigned any role at any level. This notwithstanding, many scholars have written about its importance to the development of the nation as a distinct language of its own (Akande, 2010); as a means of human development (Motanya, 2017); as a national tool for dissemination of information that is meant for both the literates and the illiterates (Okafor, 2022); as contributing to nation building through conveying useful information for national integration and sustainable development (Emike, Magaji & Baidu, 2019). The existence of a Nigerian form of pidgin English called Nigerian Pidgin English has been attested to by many scholars (Agheyisi, 1971; Elugbe and Omamor, 1971) and its importance in the linguistically heterogenous Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. Balogun (2003) in Motanya (2017) claims that the Nigerian Pidgin is understood and spoken by a greater percentage of Nigerian people, even though it is viewed by some people as ‘nonstandard’.

### **Redefining Nigerian Language Planning for Economic Development**

The role of language in the socio-economic development of a nation cannot be over-emphasised (Mkwinda-Nyasulu, 2013). Therefore, for this goal of socio-economic development to be realised, language planning has to be viewed with seriousness. Language planning is a deliberate attempt to influence the structure and functions of a language with a view to bringing about growth and development, not only in the education sector but also in other areas of life in the nation. Language planning can be status planning or corpus planning. It is status planning that shows what a language is used for and what relations exists among the languages in a multilingual setting. Corpus language planning, on the other hand, has to do with the development of a language. It is the contention of this paper that redefining the roles assigned the indigenous languages of Nigeria and the Nigerian Pidgin English will contribute to the economic development of the country.

One of the national development goals of Nigeria is building a great and dynamic economy. Towing the line of Adam Smith’s Theory of Specialization, Nigerian indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin English could be adopted for economic related activities that will eventually culminate in economic growth and development. The thrust of Adam Smith’s Theory of Specialization is that specialization leads to economic development. This idea, if adapted to language planning could see the languages of the country being given specialized roles which will eventually lead to economic development in this post-covid era. The languages that could be so specially employed are the indigenous languages of Nigeria and the Nigerian Pidgin English.

### **Making a Case for Nigerian Indigenous Languages and the Nigerian Pidgin English**

The importance of indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin English to national development has been seen to be great. Emike, Magaji & Baidu (2019), hinging their study on the Independent Parallel Development Theory and the Neutralist Perspective, conclude ‘that Nigerian Pidgin English contributes to the building of Nigeria as it is used to convey useful information for national integration and sustainable development.’ Olaoye (2013) observed that indigenous languages play fundamental roles on issues such as ‘democracy, technology, metalanguage and linguistic globalization’ in national development. The indices of development include ‘internal cohesion, integration, unity, economic wellbeing and citizens’ participation in governance’ (Olaoye, 2013). These and other scholars’ point of convergence has always been that indigenous languages contribute to the growth and development of individuals as well as societies and its neglect portends retardation in many regards.

To further show the significance of indigenous languages to national development, Adegbite (2004), among other scholars, argues that lack of development in African nations is largely

attributable to lack of recognition for and underutilisation of African indigenous languages and cultures.

The NPE, on the other hand, is a language of wider communication amongst many groups of people, especially in the Eastern part, Niger-Delta region and other cosmopolitan areas of the country like Lagos, Kaduna and Ibadan. In fact, the NPE effectively substitutes for the official English language in the areas of business transaction, entertainment, advertisement and public enlightenment in many areas across Nigeria.

With these unarguable contributions of the NILs and the NPE to national development, it is the view of this paper that with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economic and other aspects of people's lives and considering the acceptability of pidgin English by educated as well as non-educated populace of the country (Motanya, 2017), the pidgin English as well as the indigenous languages could be officially given the role of language of business, trade and commerce in the country. The indigenous languages could be restricted to their areas of usage while the NPE could be given a specialized use of an unofficial national language of business, trade and commerce.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way a number of things are done in the whole world. Education now tends more towards e-learning and online delivery as against what used to be. The socio-economic life of countries of the world has also been re-defined greatly by the novel ideas brought up by the exigency of the pandemic. It has been observed that the status planning of the languages of the country does not maximise the potentials of the NILs as well as the NPE in engendering economic growth in the Nigerian post COVID-19 environment.

Apart from this, if adopted the NPE will simplify and harmonise communications among the various strata of the indigenous languages spoken in the economy and this will enhance commerce and trade, thus leading to economic growth and development.

### **Recommendation**

This paper recommends the adaptation of the Adam Smith's Theory of Specialization to status language planning in Nigeria whereby languages will be assigned specialised roles like adopting the NILs as Nigeria's languages of business, trade and commerce at regional level and the NPE at national level because of its heterogeneity in usage in the country.



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VOL 10 NO 1 MARCH 2023