A Proposal for the Adoption of Standard Nigerian English as a National Language in Nigeria

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Abstract
In view of its potential to foster national unity and development, the adoption of a national language is desirable. However, in the Nigerian context, the desirability is often not backed by concrete, actionable plans. Even where policies are well formulated, the implementation is usually deficient and does not produce the desired results. The main objective of this paper is, therefore, to propose multiple (three or five) national languages for Nigeria, one of which should be the Standard Nigerian English (SNE). Although the Standard British English (SBE) is Nigeria's official language, its domesticated, indigenised variety (i.e., SNE) is being proposed for upgrade and adoption as one of the three or five national languages because it uniquely reflects the Nigerian identity and socio-cultural milieux. The argument is anchored on both diachronic and synchronic considerations – historical evidence and current objective realities. SNE has great potentials, and can satisfy all the parameters to serve as a veritable tool to unite the various segments in Nigeria, among other things. There is ample evidence from research findings that a reasonable percentage of Nigerians are currently exposed to, or use the SNE, and the number will continue to increase with time. The SNE also enjoys a considerable degree of local acceptability as well as international intelligibility, and the ratings are on the rise. The paper concludes that research at codification, standardization, documentation and survey of language use and attitude must be conducted and geared toward the attainment of the desired goal. In the same vein, Federal and State governments must muster the courage and political will to vigorously pursue and adequately fund this laudable national language project to its logical, successful conclusion.

Introduction
According to Ethnologue (2024), Nigeria has an estimated population of about 223,805,000 people. There are 532 indigenous languages out of which 12 are now extinct. Of the 520 remaining languages, three (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) have official or quasi-official status, because they are referenced in the 1999 Constitution, the National Policy on Education (2013), and so on. They are also referred to as 'major' or 'majority' languages because of the relatively large population of the speakers and their spread. Nigerian Pidgin (NP or Naija) is a *lingua franca*, being creolised and indigenous too. There are also about 10 non-indigenous languages in Nigeria, including English, Arabic and French. The Standard British English, since Independence, has served as the official and second language, but, so far, there is no national language in Nigeria (see also National Language Policy, 2022; etc.).

A national language is not exactly the same as an official language or a *lingua franca*, although they may share some similarities and are often seen (rightly or erroneously) as synonyms. The fundamental issue is indigeneity and cultural bond which national language conjures. In essence, a national language can only be served by an indigenous language (or a mother-tongue) so recognized or adopted by a country or nation. An official language or a *lingua franca* can be either endogenous or exogenous. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural,

heterogeneous and plurilingual entity – an amalgam of diverse, hitherto independent (and now, competing) nations. Nigeria is made up of over 250 ethnic groups. This is a major challenge in her quest to forge or arrive at a national language. This also is a good reason to suggest multiple national languages to cater for the large population and numerous languages that cohabit, or co-exist in Nigeria. It is a plausibility that two or all three of the major languages emerge as national languages in the nearest future, ceteris paribus. Nigerian Pidgin can also not be ruled out as a contender in the race, especially if as many as five languages are being considered, as proposed. However, the upgrade of Nigerian English to the status of a national language is the focus of this paper.

A Brief History of English and Its Evolutionary Trends in Nigeria

Among the general characteristics of human language are: creativity, productivity, universality and uniqueness. Language is also culturally transmitted and dynamic. Language changes temporally and spatially. Some centuries ago, English was a language of the commoners, barbarians. Over the years, it survived despite the unfavourable and harsh conditions, and metamorphosed to become a language embraced by all, including the aristocrat, the powerful, the upper class and so on. From Old English to Medieval or Middle English and now to Modern or Contemporary English. It is a story of Darwinism – survival of the fittest. Shakespearean English, also known as Early Modern English, is the type spoken and written during the time of William Shakespeare around the late 1500 to early 1700. The orthography, vocabulary and even syntax of that variety are distinct from those of Contemporary English such that anyone reading Shakespeare's works today requires some kind of glossary or annotation to make sense of the text.

The evolution of English in Nigeria cannot be fully discussed without reference to history – the European explorers (15th century), transatlantic slave traders (16th – 19th century), legitimate trade merchants, missionaries and colonialists (19th – 20th century). English and some European languages were in West Africa as far back as 1500 but the preference here is to focus on the period when freed slaves were resettled in Freetown (Sierra Leone 1792) and Monrovia (Liberia 1822). Some of the ex-slaves had learnt or acquired one variety of English or the other having stayed either in Britain or America, and so on. This period also coincided with the publication of Olaudah Equiano's autobiography (1789). Equiano (a.k.a. Gustavus Vassa) was born 1745 in Essaka (present-day Anambra State of Nigeria) but sold into slavery at a young age. He was in the United Kingdom after his liberation and joined the anti-slave trade crusade, when he wrote his autobiography. He died in 1797. In addition, among those in Freetown and Monrovia were Nigerians, including those who went to trade or school in those cities where they were exposed to the American or British dialect of English, and perhaps, the Jamaican Creole.

The 1884 Berlin Conference carved out 'Nigeria' for Britain but Lagos was already a British colony since 1861. However, the real Nigeria started in 1914 with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by Fredrick Lugard who was the Governor-General, and whose partner, (later wife, Flora Shaw) gave Nigeria its name. And the name, coined from the "Niger area" remains with us till date. In 1914, several "strange bedfellows" were cramped together in a single room, just for the economic benefit of the colonial masters. From the Kanem-Bornu Empire to Sokoto Caliphate, from Old Oyo Empire to Benin Kingdom, and many more – the seeds of disunity and unhealthy rivalry had been planted. The seeds have

germinated and grown, and Nigeria has been grappling with the consequences of that action since Independence.

The English language has sojourned in Nigeria for over two centuries. Even if the events preceding 1792 or 1822 are disregarded, and 1914 is chosen, it means that English has been around Nigeria for 111 years. This language has advantages over the 500 indigenous languages. It can be conveniently stated that the English of 1914 or 1960 in Nigeria is the British English but the 2025 English in Nigeria is definitely a different variety from the SBE. The native speakers and near-native speakers of English who were in Nigeria or who taught in various Nigerian institutions are no longer here (see also Elugbe 1990, pp. 12ff; Jowitt 1991 & 1995).

Several generations of speakers, users or teachers of Queen's English or Received Pronunciation have come and gone. English has since left its native-speaker environment to cohabit, co-exist with hundreds of other Nigerian languages. That English has now been assimilated, acculturated, domesticated or nativized. It is, therefore, impossible or extremely difficult for a "black skin to speak with a white tongue". Perhaps, the only exception to this rule is if the black skin is radically exposed to, or immersed in SBE, then s/he should be able to speak or write Queen's (or King's) English. In essence, the varieties of English in Nigeria today include Standard Nigerian English, Popular Nigerian English, Non-Standard Nigerian English (or Broken?). Nigerian Pidgin (Naija) is on its own, a separate language. It is no longer fashionable to categorise SBE as a Nigerian variety because its speakers are negligible or nonexistent.

Previous Proposals for National Language since Independence

At Independence in 1960, the sentiments of some patriotic Nigerians were against English which was considered a part of the relics of imperialism that must be discarded, extinguished or dumped into the bin of history (or at best kept in the archives or museum). In the words of Jowitt (1995, p. 36) "So far as many articulate Nigerians are concerned, this automatically rules out English as a candidate for the status of a national language; the status can only be accorded to one or more of the indigenous languages". Simpson (1978), Olagoke (1982) and Ikara (1987) are amongst those who prefer indigenous languages to English. According to Sofunke (1990, 32), Nigeria, in the words of Simpson (1978, p. 1), must break "…clean with the languages imposed by erstwhile slave masters and today's colonialists." Similarly, Ikara (1987) advocates the adoption of Hausa as Nigeria's national language because it is spoken in eight out of the 19 States of the Federation at the time. He also proposed Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as official languages instead of English.

However, there were other Nigerians who argued that English is a neutral language and better developed (in terms of graphisation, standardisation, text books, etc.) than virtually all the indigenous languages. It is equally true that the historical machination that crafted or created Nigeria has made it impossible for English to be sidelined or neglected in the scheme of things. Eventually, English was declared official language, second language and *lingua franca*. It is the language of administration, politics, banking, journalism, medium of instruction in schools, and so on. It looked like the stone that was rejected by the builder has now become the cornerstone of the house.

Another factor that worked in favour of English is the mistrust or mutual suspicion and fear of domination among the various ethnic and linguistic groups in Nigeria. A case in point is the proposal by Tai Solarin in 1966 in a newspaper column where he advised the military

junta to impose Hausa on Nigerians as the national language or *lingua franca*. Solarin believed that Hausa had the highest number of speakers, has affinities with other West African countries, and that it was an easy-to-learn language. Unfortunately, the timing was wrong, because it happened after the 1966 military coup and counter-coup which eventually led to a large-scale massacre of Igbo people in the Hausa speaking part of northern Nigeria.

According to Achebe (2009, pp. 101-102): "A famous educationist well known for his opposition to the continued use of English in Nigeria wrote in a Lagos newspaper offering incredible suggestion that if all Nigerians had spoken one language, the killings would not have happened. And he went further to ask the Nigerian army to impose Hausa on Nigeria…." Achebe added, "Fortunately, people were too busy coping with the threat of disintegration facing the country to pay serious attention to his bizarre suggestion. But I could not resist writing a brief rejoinder in which I reminded him that the thousands who had been killed did, in fact, speak excellent Hausa." What Achebe euphemistically described as a brief rejoinder was actually a scathingly abrasive and very critical piece. Imagine how serious it would have been if Solarin had proposed his own mother tongue, Yoruba. Shortly after the rejoinder by Achebe, Tai Solarin changed his position, in the interest of peace and tranquility. Unfortunately, a few months later, the Nigerian Civil War broke out (1967 – 1970). Mutual distrust and fear of hegemony or domination still remain among the various segments of the Nigerian society, majority and minority alike, six and a half decades after independence. Osaji (1979, p. 155) advocates the adoption of English.

Some other proposals are summarized thus.

a) A Pan-African Language (e.g. Swahili);
b) An Artificial National Language (e.g. WAZOBIA & Guosa);
c) A Minority Language (e.g. Igala), and
d) Nigerian Pidgin.

Unilingual versus Multilingual National Language was also debated (see Jowitt 1995: 34 – 36). It was Soyinka, for instance, who advocated Ki-Swahili as Africa's continental *lingua franca* in 1977 at the Black Festival of Arts and Culture FESTAC. He also argued that no single indigenous Nigerian language can be universally accepted as a national language due to the rivalry among the various ethnic groups. He himself wrote extensively, and still writes in English, just like Achebe. This does not make Soyinka a less patriotic Nigerian because, he is still connected to his African or Yoruba Nigerian roots (despite being an international figure). The same can be said of Achebe who uses English skilfully to express his unique socio-cultural and political experiences, identity and consciousness (see also Achebe 1975).

Also proposed were artificial languages such as WaZoBia – blending words from the three major Nigerian languages in a sentence – and another by Alex Igbineweka (1981), called Guosa. Igbineweka was of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Lagos who had a dream and "…received publicity from both the print and the electronic media", but his dream remained what it is, because linguists and non-linguists have criticized this Esperanto-like design. According to Elugbe (1990, p. 11) "The serious business of national languages and national development must not be stalled by such unproductive proposals as WaZoBia or Guosa". In essence, an artificial language cannot replace a living language to serve as Nigeria's national language because it is very unrealistic, no matter the 'genuine intension' of the proponent.

There is another sense in which WAZOBIA has been formulated as a policy by the Federal Government. In the maiden edition of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977, p. 5), Government appreciates the importance of language in the education system and also as a means of cultural preservation, and so, "…considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) other than his (or her) mother tongue."

In addition, at the pre-primary and junior primary levels, "Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community". Moreover, Government shall develop orthography for many more Nigerian languages, produce text books in the languages, and establish a Language Centre (NPE, 1977, p. 6). All the statements above are repeated in the 2013 edition of the NPE (on pp. 15-16 & 20-21). Even in 2025, there has been no significant modification to this policy. The only challenge is in the implementation. One would have thought that these policy measures were meant to promote and develop Nigerian languages, particularly the three major ones so that one or two of them could emerge as national language in the nearest future. English was meant to be taught as a subject, at the pre-primary and junior primary level; but to be the medium of instruction from senior primary upwards (Transitional Bilingualism as opposed to full primary level mother-tongue education).

There were Nigerians, no matter how few, who felt that since there was no agreement about which of the major languages to be adopted, the solution was to propose one of the minority languages. Sofunke (1990) belongs to this group. He provides arguments to disqualify the three major languages, and ended up proposing Igala as a minority language that can fill the void. He also objects to the multilingual approach to solving the national language problem just as he objects to the adoption of any foreign language. At the end of his argument, Sofunke (1990, p. 47) proposed a unilingual solution and concludes: "In a nutshell, I suggest that Nigeria adopts Igala as her national language…. It will then be imperative for … Igala … as a national language to respond linguistically to the new realities". This is not a popular proposal.

Nigerian Pidgin (or NP) has also been proposed as a possible candidate for the national language race. It is a blend of English and indigenous languages serving as the trace languages (Mbagwu & Eme, 2012). It is a *lingua franca* which is popular in informal domains, in adverts, plays, film and literary works generally. It has been studied extensively (see for instance, Gani-Ikilama 1990; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991; Adegbija, 1994; Ojo & Ogunjimi, 2020; Nwokorie, 2023; and Ugwuanyi, 2025). The popularity of NP also stems from the fact that it is now the First Language of some people, especially in southern Nigeria, and it is being creolised. In a multilingual approach to national language, NP is considered a contender, ceteris paribus.

In the words of Oyelaran (1990, p. 26-27),

> Bamgbose (1976) identifies three policy options for Nigeria: 1) the status quo approach which would retain English as a *lingua franca*; 2) the gradualist approach which would involve planned multilingualism until one language evolves as *lingua franca*; and 3) the radical approach which calls for an immediate policy decision in favour of a particular language. That language will then be taught in all the States, in addition to the major language of the States and English.

It is not very clear whether or not national language is used as a synonym for *lingua franca* in this context. However, option three is not viable because even the military will not impose any particular language (major, minor, etc.) because of a possible backlash.

Bamgbose's second option is implied in the policy statement quoted from NPE 1977 above, and which is repeated in 1981, 1998, 2004, and 2013 editions of the NPE (cf, paragraphs 55 & 97 of the 1999 Constitution, as amended, 2011). He is of the opinion that "If the language of national integration is one which unites the various ethnic groups as well as the elite and the masses, that language is yet to be found in Nigeria and an essential prerequisite to finding it is a firm decision on one of the three policy approaches above" (Oyelaran 1990: 27). As at 1976 when this view was expressed, not many people would have suggested SBE as a national language in Nigeria. However, the proposal here is to strike a balance between Bamgbose's Options 1 and 2 – plan, develop and adopt (two or four) Nigerian languages to join SNE as multiple national languages rather than upgrade SNE only.

The Remarkable Profile of SNE

English is a global language which has its tentacles in virtually all the continents. In Nigeria, English is not a foreign language but an L2 as well as Official language. It is also a *lingua franca* is some respects. The English of 1914 or 1960 or even 1990 can conveniently be referred to as SBE. It may also be argued that the English in Nigeria up to the year 2000 is also SBE because that is the model officially recognized in the education system and in official domains. However, it must be pointed out that several generations of native speakers and near-native speakers of SBE or Queen's English or Received Pronunciation (RP) who served and taught in Nigeria have since departed.

In essence, English which has left its native soil to co-exist with 500 other languages for over a century has now been acculturated, assimilated, indigenized, and domesticated in the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. That makes it practically impossible or very difficult for a "black skin to speak with a white tongue". Perhaps, the only exception to this rule is if the black skin is solidly exposed to, or immersed in the tongue of the white. Therefore, in the context of 2025 Nigeria, it is Nigerian English, a variety of the New Englishes, that should be the focus of attention. And it is the Standard version of NE (SNE) that is being proposed as one of the national languages.

Studies on NE started with Brosnaham (1958), then Walsh (1967), Salami (1968), Bamgbose (1971), Banjo (1971), and so on. The first book publication on NE is based on the papers presented at a conference which held at the University of Ibadan in 1978. Edited by Ebo Ubahakwe in 1979, the book is titled *Varieties and Functions of English in Nigeria*. Several M.A. and PhD theses and dissertations, journal articles, festschrifts, books and book chapters have been produced or published on NE (see also Awonusi & Babalola, Eds, 2004; Surakat, 2010; Inyima, 2019; Jowitt & Ugwuanyi 2025; Ugwauanyi & Aboh 2025). There is also an association of scholars, researchers, teachers of NE, which is more than forty years old – the English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (ESAN, formerly known as the Nigeria English Studies Association, NESA). Dictionaries and specialist lexicons have been produced on NE (e.g. Igboanusi, 2002 & 2010; Adegbite, Udofot & Ayoola, 2014, etc.) just as efforts are ongoing to revise and update the dictionaries. Nigerian English, in a nutshell has attracted research attention locally and internationally just as it has gained global recognition. The

Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, contains several entries from NE. Furthermore, research efforts are geared towards codification and standardization of NE.

According to the most recent publication on NE, Ugwuanyi (2025, p. 1): "The volume demonstrates the enormous contributions of Nigerian English to the field of world Englishes." It is also stated that "Nigerian English has been described as the fastest growing variety of new Englishes globally (Kperogi, 2015). Nigeria also ranks second only to India in terms of the number of L2 English speakers worldwide and, of course, has the highest number of English speakers in Africa (Pinon & Haydon, 2010)".

In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of English speakers in Nigeria ranged between 10% and 30% of the entire population. In the words of Elugbe (1990, p. 10) "Although estimates of the percentage of Nigerians able to speak English are usually of the 30% mark, Bamgbose (1983, p. 5) puts the figure as low as 10%. According to him, "Perhaps …90 per cent of our people in both the urban and rural areas are untouched by the alleged communicative role of English" (see also Jowitt, 1991 & 1995). The situation has changed because as at 2010, over 80 million Nigerians or about 50% of the population use English. Again, in the words of Ugwuanyi (2025, p. 1),

> While a recent UNESCO (2021) estimate suggests that around 53% of Nigerians speak some form of English, a more ambitious estimate by Piller (2022) puts the number of NE speakers at about 178 million (roughly 70% of the country's population) based on which it may be argued that Nigeria has the third highest number of English speakers in the world after India and the United States.

The research findings about the attitude of Nigerians to the desirability and acceptability of SNE as a national language are encouraging although more efforts are required in terms of advocacy, mass mobilization, mass literacy campaign, and ethical reorientation. The SNE also has a reasonable degree of international intelligibility, the rating of which shall continue to increase with standardization, codification, and so on (see also Inyima 2019; Jowitt 2019; Jowitt & Ugwuanyi 2025; Ugwuanyi & McKenzie 2025; and Aboh 2025).

Concluding Remarks

Language, arguably, is a neutral resource at the disposal of the homo-sapiens. But it is the use of language that makes it a double-edged sword, because it can be deployed for good or for evil. Language use can prompt a gift of kolanut from the pocket of an interlocutor, just as it can equally cause removal of a sword from its sheath. The point remains that a common language within a multi-ethnic, pluri-lingual country is desirable because it will facilitate effective communication, foster unity, peace, understanding and development. However, that common language which unites all can only be achieved at a cost – all stakeholders must be committed and make the necessary sacrifice. And the race is a marathon, a destination, not a dash. It requires endurance, resilience and focus, among other qualities.

In a situation where there is unhealthy rivalry or mutual suspicion among the components of the country, the national language project becomes an uphill task which requires proper planning, meticulous implementation and adequate funding. All hands must be on deck and no segment should feel marginalized or excluded. Therefore, the selection of the languages to be promoted is one of steps that must be cautiously taken. The debates or proposals over the

selection of majority or minority or neutral languages must ensure inclusivity and language rights at the various levels – the federal, state and local government levels. It requires mass mobilisation, mass literacy, and aggressive national ethical reorientation so that all stakeholders are carried along through the long and arduous journey.

The size or population and land mass as well as the heterogeneity of Nigeria demands that more than just the three major languages are promoted, developed and enhanced. Otherwise, some segments may feel marginalised and refuse to cooperate. But how many languages can be involved, and how do we do the selection? These questions are relevant in view of some nationalists who strongly believe that the national language question and mother-tongue education must be properly addressed to facilitate harmony and national development. Some went as far as stating that "…no nation has had a breakthrough through the instrumentality of an alien language" to justify the urgent need for an indigenous official or national language. Indigenous languages cannot be imposed or forced on Nigerians. The act has to be planned, funded, and implemented over a long period of time.

There is another position that speaking the same language in a given country is not a guarantee for peace, harmony and development. The disposition of the political leaders especially in the dispensation of justice and socio-economic welfare are far more relevant than speaking a common language. In this case, it seems the argument is that the status quo be maintained. Therefore, English shall remain the dominant language in Nigeria in terms of the number of speakers, the domains of use, the level of development and so on. If, however, there is a referendum today that supports the national language project, the proposal here is that three or five languages, including Standard Nigerian English should be considered. The point by Elugbe (1990, p. 15) is relevant here. He states, "…developing our indigenous languages does not mean abandoning English. There is, for the foreseeable future, no alternative to concurrent investment in (Nigerian) English (and Nigerian languages)."

On this optimistic note, the expected roles of the stakeholders in the national language project should be highlighted. Experts in relevant fields: linguists, psychologists, social scientists and so on, must be involved in the planning and implementation of the project. Among linguists, there should be a good blend of sociolinguists, applied linguists, language policy planners, developmental psycholinguists, philosophers and so on. As a corollary, emphasis on STEM which seems to exclude or marginalize the Humanities should be modified as STEAM, with the 'A' standing for Arts (or Humanities). The national language project is about humanity, hence experts from the relevant fields of Humanities must be involved. Similarly, the linguist is a social scientist. Therefore, attention should not be focused on the micro-linguistic issues alone. Socio-economic, cultural and even political factors must be given adequate consideration.

Successive governments have neglected languages over the decades. Many Nigerian languages require graphisation, developing materials in them, training teachers, production of text books and dictionaries, and so on. Politicians usually invest in projects that yield immediate returns to show for campaigns or for bragging purposes, but investments in language do not yield immediate quantifiable results (see also Elugbe 1990: 16ff). Therefore, governments at all levels must change their attitudes to funding language projects which can best be described as legacy projects.

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