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THE NAIJA LANGUAGE AND THE “NAIJA LANGUEJ
AKADEMI” AS AN IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The combat against Western linguistic subjugation in Nigeria has been multifaceted and complex. This complex combat is today visible in the move in favor of the teaching, promotion and elevation of Nigerian languages, as well as in the very ardent struggle to develop the (hitherto) marginalized Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), henceforth referred to as *naija*. The strong support given to the idea of (re)habilitating the Nigerian Pidgin English rests on the belief by many endogenous linguists and informed critics that the NPE or *naija* language could be Nigeria's lingua franca in the absence of an acceptable indigenous language. Using critical observations and literary sources, this paper attempts to show how the *naija* language and the “Naija Languej Akademi” principally constitute an ideological movement. Hinging on a number of language and culture theories including ethnocentrism, de-westernization and indigenization, the paper argues that the ideological nature of the *naija* language could be deduced from two major facts: (i) the revision of the name given the linguistic code (from Nigerian Pidgin English to *naija*), a revision which is done in a way as to capture the Nigerian identity and the culturalist/conservatist philosophy overriding the conception of its orthography; and (ii) NLA's adoption of an indigenized (Nigerianized) orthographic system for the language. The paper equally examines the implication(s) of such an ideological movement on Nigeria's thorny language question.

Key Words: Naija, Naija Languej Akademi, Ethnocentrism, The Nigerian Language Question

INTRODUCTION

Discourses on the status, the weight and the expansion of languages in a particular socio-cultural ecology are often anchored on specific ideological frameworks. This is thanks to the fact that language is a carrier of culture and a veritable site of cultural determinism, cultural definition or/and imperialism. In consonance with this, the modern European languages are often considered by most African conservatists and culturalists as veritable instruments of western cultural imperialism. These two schools of thought conversely consider African indigenous languages to be a site of African resistance to such a cultural hegemony (Endong 2014, Essoh & Endong, 2014). In his book titled “*Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*”, Wa Thiongo (1981, p. 5) shared this position as he argued that “it is axiomatic that the renaissance of African cultures (should not die) in the language of Europe”. With close reference to the Nigerian experience, Salawu (2006) similarly insisted that “the English language [in Nigeria] is the main carrier of western hegemonic culture” (p. 3). In effect, the English language – like the other modern European languages – is viewed as the single most characteristic element of the western culture. Though there exists a relatively high number of varieties of the language – notably the Nigerian English – which, to a large extent, are influenced by Nigerian cultures and values, the English language is mostly perceived as a symbol of the western culture and an incarnation of western linguistic and cultural imperialism. Maduka (2003, p. 11) has for instance, remarked that the ubiquitous English language is systematically used by most multinational media firms to impose alien values on the Third World countries. Based on these series of premises, African culturalists have fervently advocated ethnocentric linguistic initiatives – notably the stabilization of the teaching of indigenous languages – as practical strategies to “bail out” African countries from their “official linguistic subjugation” (Mokwenye 2007:115 Maduka 2003:18). In tandem with this, Salawu (2006, p. 3) contended that while Africans cannot wish away the fact of history, as represented by colonialism, which has made Western languages – especially English and French – to be global and connecting modes, yet, they – as people of the less-dominant cultures – cannot afford to lose the whole essence of their being, that is their languages. In the same line of argument, Maduka (2003, p. 18), with reference to Nigeria, strongly recommended that:

Nigeria [like any other African nation] needs to come out boldly in search of its true national identity by eschewing any tendency to Europeanize itself. It has to find ways of endearing itself to the world community by proving that it can push the world civilization forward by discovering the hidden formula for using her languages as tools for national development.

In Nigeria, the combat against this perceived Western linguistic subjugation is therefore visible in the move in favor of the teaching, promotion and elevation of Nigerian languages, as well as in the very ardent struggle to develop the marginalized Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), henceforth referred to as *naija*. The strong support given to the idea of (re)habilitating the Nigerian pidgin English rests on the belief by many endogenous linguists that the NPE or *naija* language “could be Nigeria’s lingua franca in the absence of an acceptable indigenous language” (Ugot 2005, p. 27, Okon 2003). This paper attempted to show how the *naija* language is principally an ideological movement, hinging on a number of language and culture theories including ethnocentrism, de-westernization and indigenization. The paper equally examines the implication(s) of such an ideological movement on Nigeria’s thorny language question. This paper is based on three principal theories namely ethnocentrism, indigenization and de-westernization. Ethnocentrism could be associated with cultural particularism. It is a doctrine which advocates that arguments be based on the idea and beliefs of a particular culture and that such beliefs and cultures be used to judge other cultures.

1. THE *NAIJA* LANGUAGE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIO-LINGUISTIC SPHERE

Naija is a term used in reference to an English based pidgin employed as a vehicular language by Nigerians to facilitate communication in inter and intra ethnic communication contexts. The language is a consequence of the fusion of several Nigerian languages and modern European languages, notably English, French, Portuguese/Spanish, and German among others. Its grammar is, to a high extent, influenced by the grammar of the various Nigerian languages with which the European languages have come in contact and according to Bandia (1994:94), numerous aspects of Nigerian oral tradition can be found in the *naija* language. These peculiarities of Nigerian oral tradition include idiomatic expressions fashioned after such types of discourses where human traits are assigned to animal, proverb from the various Nigerian languages or expressions which are reminiscent of the manner in which people show excitement about gossip in some oral tradition contexts. Balogun (2013:93) mentions some of the aspects of Nigerian oral tradition when he notes peculiar uses of the language by specific ethnic groups in Nigeria. He contends that:

Ethnic groups in Nigeria can communicate in the language though they usually have their own additional words. For example, the Igbos added ‘*Nna*’ at the beginning of some sentences to add effects to the meaning of their sentences [...] This same additional effect can be found among the Yorubas who normally added the words “*Se*” and “*Abi*” to their own dialect of Nigerian Pidgin. Such native words are often used at the start and end of an intonated sentence or question.

Given the fact that the *naija* language has so much absorbed peculiarities of Nigerian autochthonous languages, and cultures, scholars such as Banjo (1996) have arguably classified it alongside Nigerian indigenous languages. However, Balogun (2013, p. 92) rejects this position, contending that though *naija* cuts across different ethnic and regional boundaries, “it is not native, but a language that emerged as a consequence of the necessity of inter-intra ethnic and regional communication”. A number of positions have relegated *naija* to a basilect, or a mecrolet of the English language, or an adulterated form of the English language. However, *naija* is to be viewed as an autonomous language. In effect, hinging on Gilman’s (1979, p. 272) definition of pidgins, *naija* would rather be regarded as an entirely independent tongue, different from English. Gilman explains that:

Pidgin [...] is different from English and used for different purposes, so that people who know English quite well continue to use pidgin for some purposes and English for others. It is this ability of speakers to keep the languages separate and use them for different purposes which distinguishes Pidgin from imperfectly learned English.

It may further be argued that the independent (autonomous) status of *naija* is established by three principal facts: (i) several speakers of *naija* in Nigeria do not speak the English language. For this category of people, *naija* is an independent language with a somewhat similar status to their vernacular; (ii) many children born to parents from different ethnic background use *naija* as their first language. In line with this, Mokwenye (2007, p. 122) had estimated the number of such users to more than one million; (iii) The *naija* language has a grammar. This constitutes one of the principal characteristics of an independent language (Balogun 2013; Essoh and Endong 2013). Though regarded by most Nigerian linguistic as an independent language and a ubiquitous medium of communication, *naija* has not been assigned an official recognition in the Nigerian language and educational policy. The language is highly marginalized and pejoratively relegated to the status of language of (semi) illiterates, a mark of the bastardization of the English language, an inferior language, a bad language, a deviated form of language and the like. However, the language is tolerated and promoted as “it reflects national ideas, values, political and socio-economic development, peace and unity” (Balogun 2013, p. 93). The promotion of the *naija* language is mainly taken care of by the Naija Languej Akademi (NLA) an institution created in 2009 and supported by the French Institute for research in Africa (IFRA). The NLA has initiated a number of moves aimed at the facilitating the growth of the language. These moves include a review of the name of the language (from Nigerian Pidgin English to *naija*), the development of a reference guide comprising the language alphabet, a comprehensive dictionary and a standard guide for its orthography. The institution also has as two of its strategic projects to drive the introduction of these guides to schools and facilitate the vulgarization of the (new) standard orthography it

developed for *naija* – the Linguist Orthography of the *naija* language – in the whole country.

2. HOW IS THE NAIJA LANGUAGE AN IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT?

The ideological nature of the *naija* language could be deduced from two major facts: the revision of the name given the linguistic code (from Nigerian Pidgin English to *naija*), a revision which is done in a way as to capture the Nigerian identity and the culturalist/conservatist philosophy overriding the conception of its orthography. In effect, in its history and evolution, the *naija* language has been subject to numerous categorizations which have progressively made it to move from all embracing categorizations (such as West African Pidgin English or pidgins) to an exclusivist categorization artfully branded “*naija*”. This progressive and exclusivist categorization reveals its proponents’ ardent desire to associate *naija* with Nigeria’s identity and cultural values. Providing a strong defense for such an identity assertion, Ofuluke and Esizementor (2009) note that:

What hitherto was referred to as Nigerian Pidgin is no longer a pidgin because it has creolized in some parts of the country; its functions have surpassed the functions of a pidgin; and the term ‘pidgin’ has helped to encourage derogatory connotations about the language; hence, the term *Naijá* espouses the language’s distinct identity as a language in its own right as well as the Nigerian spirit.

In effect, “*naija*” rimes and resonates perfectly well with the country’s name “Nigeria” and even constitutes one of the appellations often used in informal contexts to make reference to the country. As an original and meaningful coinage, “*naija*” equally excludes references to the English language which are very much inherent in appellations such as “Nigerian Pidgin English”, “Nigerian Pidgin” or “Pidgin English”. These references to English could only remind users of the long western linguistic subjugation or the dependence of the *naija* language on English language. Another fact which clearly establishes *naija*’s ideological character is the conception, nature or structure of the language’s orthography. Here again, it is easily observable that the conceivers of the language’s orthography strove to somehow remarkably depart from the orthographic systems of the western languages, to adopt an original writing system which, to a high extent is visibly patterned like the orthographic systems of African languages. In other words, the language’s standard orthographic system has somehow been indigenized to express his proponents’ pride in African (Nigerian) culture. Spelling traditions (such as the Press Orthography (PO)) which tend to be more inclined towards the anglicized style of spelling words are systematically downplayed in favor of Africanized orthographic systems. Ofulue and Esizementor (2009) make allusion to the localized nature of *naija*’s standard orthography when they note and laud the *Naija Languej Akademi* (NLA) for its adoption or institution of diagraphs and diacritics

which are typical of some Nigerian languages in particular and African vernaculars in general. They insightfully concede that:

The general principle adopted by the academy [the Naija language Akademi] is that the orthography of Naijá should be phonetically based. That is, words should be spelled and written as pronounced according to the sound patterns of Naijá. And that the orthography should be based on common core features of Naijá rather than on a particular regional or social dialect of the language. Guided by the principles of simplicity, familiarity and harmonization, the academy adopted the use of diagraphs and diacritics to represent sounds that are not in the Roman alphabet such as ch, gb, sh, kp, zh, similar to those used in the alphabets of many Naijá substrate languages like Edo, Itsekiri, Urhobo. Words borrowed from English or other languages should be written to fit Naijá's sound patterns and syllable structure.

A number of linguists and critics have earlier lamented over the fact that early and popular attempts at writing the *naija* language favored anglicized orthographic approaches. Egbokhare (2001) for instance, noted that it appears as if in order to write NP [Nigeria Pidgin], many people often take English as the departure point, "break a few rules of English grammar and insert some NP words at the appropriate positions". In tandem with this, Elugbe (1999, p. 290) remarked that it is quite common for many writers of the Nigerian Pidgin to adopt anglicized spelling traditions characterized by the writing of most Nigeria Pidgin words exactly as in English or altering only a few words. This perceived "westernization"/"Europeanization" of naija's writing system is somehow checked by NLA's development of an indigenized orthographic system. However, the adoption of such indigenizing features as diacritics (for instance sub-dots) is not without complicating the written of the language. The average users who are particularly used to the more simplified and presumed anglicized orthographic systems may find it difficult to use such complex features (the diacritics). Esizimontor (2010, p.16) notes this fact thus:

If SNO [Standard Naija Orthography] is to become popular and acceptable to users, it should carry on with what people are familiar with rather by employing a rather unfamiliar approach no matter how accurate it may be. From the POs [Press Orthographies], people are already familiar with spelling many *Naijá* words phonemically without diacritics; such that introducing an orthography with sub-dots at this point of standardisation would be inappropriate and would do the SNO no good. Since people can spell words like "dem", "don", "oga", "sef" without sub-dots, using the sub-dotted version as follows "dẹm", "dọn", "ọga", "sef" would make for a terribly

inconveniencing spelling system that may not find acceptance among many *Naijá* users.

An obvious implication of indigenizing the *Naija* language is that its orthography or writing system may be made complex to and consequently resisted by the average user. It is somehow observable that the Press Orthography which is anglicized in nature is, for the moment, more popular than the SNO. This can be seen in most if not all print media messages formulated in Nigerian Pidgin in the country.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE *NAIJA* MOVEMENT FOR NIGERIAN LANGUAGE QUESTION

The Nigerian language question partly revolves around the idea, strong desire or ideological project of “correcting” the perceived linguistico-cultural imperialism epitomized by the adoption of the English language as the official language of the Nigerian Federation. This language question is principally articulated on the chances of replacing the English language with (a) Nigerian language(s), the stabilization of the teaching and learning in/or of the mother tongue (mother tongue situation) and the prospect of the Nigerian Pidgin English in the country’s socio-linguistic ecology. The Nigerian language question continues to divide the community of Nigerian linguists as well as the political class. While a good number of Nigerian linguists have expressed positive sentiments vis-à-vis the adoption of a Nigerian language to bail out Nigeria from its official linguistic subjugation, many quarters have declared support for the development and elevation of the Nigerian Pidgin (Balogun 2013, Egbohkaré 2001, Esizimtor 2009). It goes without saying that the *Naija* language reflects Nigeria in many ways (as shown above) and the efforts of the *Naija* Language Akademi provides a number of solutions to the Nigerian language question. Though still marginalized, the *naija* language could be Nigeria’s lingua franca in the absence of an acceptable indigenous language.

CONCLUSION

The combat against Western linguistic subjugation in Nigeria has been multifaceted and complex. This complex combat is today visible in the move in favor of the teaching, promotion and elevation of Nigerian languages, as well as in the very ardent struggle to develop the (hitherto) marginalized Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), henceforth referred to as *naija*. The strong support given to the idea of (re)habilitating the Nigerian Pidgin English rests on the belief by many endogenous linguists and informed critics that the NPE or *naija* language could be Nigeria’s lingua franca in the absence of an acceptable indigenous language. Using critical observations and literary sources, this paper attempts to show how the *naija* language and the “*Naija* Language Akademi” principally constitute an ideological movement. Hinging on a number of language and culture theories including ethnocentrism, de-westernization and indigenization, this paper has argued that the ideological nature of the *naija* language

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