

# Nigerian Pidgin for sustainable national development: a sociolinguistic analysis of Charles Inojie's 'The Johnsons'

*Esther Senayon*

## Abstract

*This study revisits the Nigeria National Language question and advocates for the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as the country's national language. Extant studies around language and national development since independence often submit that for Nigeria to be a truly sovereign nation, she has to discontinue the use of English, described as a painful reminder of colonialism. Research has revealed that NP could be adopted as Nigeria's national language, but that her government has not taken this suggestion seriously due to the negative attitude of Nigerians to it, coupled with its low international status. Using the soap, *The Johnsons* by Charles Inojie on DSTV Channel 154 (Africa Magic Family) as a case study, there is ample evidence that NP remains a strong candidate for the country's national language. Data collected also reveal that NP is a fine constellation of English and Nigeria's indigenous languages, thereby confirming that it is now native to Nigeria and has also acquired native speakers. Its acceptability can be enhanced through status and corpus planning for both local acceptability and international intelligibility. The study concludes that the Nigerian government has to revisit the national language question and consider the adoption of NP for sustainable national development.*

*Keywords:* National language, Nigerian pidgin, sociolinguistics, sustainable development, *The Johnsons*

## Introduction

This study revisits the national language question and advocates for the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) as the country's national language. Extant studies on language and national development, since independence, often submit that for Nigeria to be a truly sovereign nation, she has to discontinue the use of English, which has been described as a painful reminder of colonialism (Elugbe and Omamor 1991, Egbokhare 2003). Experts argue that the continued use of English in Nigeria is tantamount to linguistic, as well as mental slavery. Research has revealed that NP could be adopted as Nigeria's national language but that government has not taken this suggestion seriously due to the negative attitude of Nigerians to it, as well as its low international status (Elugbe and Omamor 1991; Adegbija 2004; Igboanusi 2008). Using the soap, *The Johnsons* by

Charles Inojie, as a case study, there is ample evidence that NP remains a strong candidate for the country's national language. With English, the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo. and Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa), the minority languages and NP represented in peaceful coexistence, the stage is set for the resolution of the language-related conflicts in the country as illustrated in the situation comedy. Although the soap is meant as a family comedy, the deployment of NP by both educated and illiterate characters debunks the widely held view that NP is a debased language. Data collected also reveal that NP is a fine constellation of English and Nigeria's indigenous languages, thereby confirming that it is now native to Nigeria and has also acquired native speakers (Adegbija 2004; Ihemere 2006). Its status can be enhanced through status and corpus planning for both local and international acceptability.

This study investigates how the Nigerian comedy, *The Johnsons* (dir. Charles Inojie) interrogates and challenges contemporary issues that border on the day-to-day life of the average Nigerian families trying to survive in the most populous city in Nigeria, Lagos. Specifically, the paper focuses on the use of NP (more recently known as Naija) and argues that much as the soap is meant as a family comedy, it raises important questions for status and corpus language planning in Nigeria.

NP is a contact language that has gained high patronage in Nigeria, especially in the South- South zone despite the official status of English (Elugbe and Omamor 1991). A collage of English, Portuguese and Nigeria's indigenous languages, NP has become a creole in some parts of Nigeria, where a number of children currently speak it as first language. Coupled with this is the fact that it has also attained the unofficial status of lingua franca (Osoba 2015). Pidgin in Nigeria developed as a language of trade between the indigenous people of present day Nigeria, Portuguese and later European merchants as far back as the seventeenth century (Fasan 2015). It was, however, an attempt by the Nigerian people to speak English at the advent of colonization and Christian missionary activities. Today NP is spoken in all the six geo-political zones in the country, although level of use differs from zone to zone, thus attesting to its national appeal (Mann 2013). The South- South, the most linguistically heterogenous zone, is the home of Pidgin in Nigeria where, according to Elugbe and Omamor (1991), it creolized, having acquired native speakers. Even in the northern part, where its reception is poor, due to the overwhelming presence of Hausa, it still enjoys some level of patronage.

In the Nigerian linguistic equation, English enjoys the status of official language over and above the indigenous languages, which have been relegated to the background (Bamgbose 2004). English, however has to be learned in a formal setting, thus making it only within the reach of the high and mighty in the

society. NP, on the other hand, does not need any formal education to learn. It is spoken by both educated and illiterate individuals, given its ethnic neutrality and structural fluidity, thus serving as a language of unification for the speakers of over 500 indigenous languages. Iwara (2008) posits that Nigeria is the most linguistically complex country in the world and this gave room for British colonialists to manipulate the situation to their advantage by entrenching English. Although NP does not enjoy official recognition like English, it is the most widely spoken Nigerian language (Igboanusi 2008; Akande 2010).

In the wake of Nigeria's independence, scholars advocated for the use of NP as national language as a symbol of her sovereignty. Key among the arguments for NP was its widespread use and ethnic neutrality, which positioned it as the one language that Nigeria needed to unify her diverse peoples and cultures (Elugbe and Omamor 1991; Egbokhare 2003). The fact that NP draws mainly upon the lexicon and syntax of several Nigerian languages gives it a sense of belonging and nativity. Ihemere (2006) puts the number of people who speak NP as a second language in Nigeria as 75 million, making it the language with the highest number of speakers and thus giving it the status of Nigerian language (Faraclas 2004; Isiaka 2020). NP is regarded by most educated Nigerians as a de-based language, considering its structural fluidity and linguistic hybridity and its potential to level both the formally educated and the illiterate others in a manner suggestive of social class collapse. Despite agitations for its adoption as national language, much consideration in that direction has not been demonstrated by the Nigerian government and the stance of extant literature tends towards impossibility. The language still remains an unofficial lingua franca, with a poor status compared to English and the three majority languages: Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. This study, however, revisits the debate with a view to adding a positive voice to advocate for NP as national language, using the case of the popular Nigerian soap series *The Johnsons*.

### Film synopsis

*The Johnsons* is a soap opera produced by Rogers Ofime, directed by Charles Inojie and set in Lagos. It centres on the day-to-day life of the Johnson family, made up of Lucky Johnson (Charles Inojie)—the head of the family; Emu Johnson (Ada Ameh)—his wife; Jennifer Johnson (Seun Adegbesan)—their first child; Efe Johnson (Chinedu Ikedieze)—their second child; Tari Johnson (Olumide Oworu)—their third child, and Blessing Johnson (Susan Pwajok)—their fourth child. The family starts out as a middle class one but gradually becomes successful by dint of hard work, patience, honesty and dedication. These virtues are portrayed in the soap, which also is a satire that ridicules the ills of the Nigerian society. Other characters include Spiff, an adopted son of the Johnsons, Pab-

lo, the biological father of Spiff; Mohammed, the Johnsons' gatekeeper; Abulu, a friend of Efe's; Prince, Pablo's sales boy, Deputy, a friend of the Johnsons and Goodluck, Jennifer's husband. Other minor characters, who do not feature often, are Mama Yakubu, Happiness (Deputy's daughter) and Uneoma. The family is portrayed as Niger Deltan from the language of their mother, their occasional dress patterns and food culture. Various issues that pertain to the Nigerian society are addressed in the soap, which, although is meant for entertainment, also ridicules societal ills, while promoting positive human values. The soap, which started in 2012, is produced by Rogers Ofime of Native Media Limited and directed by Charles Inojie. The comedy focuses on the challenges that an average Nigerian family faces in Lagos, and in extension the wider society, and how they tackle them.

### Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design and methodology. Data were collected from several episodes of the soap for over a period of one year. The soap is aired from Mondays to Fridays by 8:30 p.m. on DSTV Africa Magic Family. A recast of all episodes for each week is done on Sundays by the same station from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. Data on NP were collected from about 350 episodes, transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Recurring themes were identified and subjected to further analysis.

### *The Johnsons and the use of Nigerian Pidgin*

Perhaps one of the most striking and hilarious aspects of *The Johnsons* is the use of NP, laced with typical Urhobo<sup>1</sup> exclamations by Emu, the illiterate wife of Lucky Johnson. She speaks only NP but will not allow herself to be intimidated by her husband's use of English as she tries to also speak English, though mostly wrongly used and hilarious. She is also the epitome of the Urhobo woman as she sometimes code-mixes NP and Urhobo, attesting to the fact that the Niger Delta is the epicenter of NP in Nigeria. References are regularly made to Warri as the home of the Johnsons. Emu represents the typical illiterate Nigerian whose best approximation to Standard English is NP. Although her husband, Lucky is highly educated and a scientist who invents drugs in his lab, he is at home with his illiterate wife. On some occasions, he tries to teach his wife English but such attempts are futile as English and NP are as different as they are distinct. However, the peaceful coexistence of English and Nigeria's indigenous languages in the Johnsons' home is a clear indication of the broader scenario in

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1 Urhobo is a minority language spoken in the South South of Nigeria. It belongs to the Edoid group of languages.

the Nigerian society. This peaceful coexistence is also apparent in the names of the Johnsons' children. Two of them answer English names (Jennifer and Blessing) while the other two answer Niger Deltan indigenous names (Efe and Tari). *Emu* laces her NP freely with lexicon from her mother tongue, Urhobo. Some of such expressions include *Akpo* (life), *Oghene* (God), *Efian* (lies), *Eweleke* (exclamation showing surprise), etc., thus confirming the amenability of NP to structural fluidity and linguistic hybridity. She speaks NP with all her children who are all educated yet speak and understand NP. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) posit that the Niger Delta is the home of Pidgin in Nigeria as the European explorers had first contact with the people living along the shores of the Niger River. It is therefore generally accepted as the standard. This position is played out by *Emu* and her peculiar variety of NP, which deviates widely from other varieties of NP represented in the soap.

Mohammed (Gaji Samuel), the gatekeeper to the Johnson family from Northern Nigeria, is another character who also uses NP and Hausa extensively in the soap, another example of the claim that NP is a language of the uneducated and unexposed. His variety of Pidgin confirms that there are different varieties in Nigeria, one of the problems anticipated around issues of standardization and adoption of NP as national language. His variety of Pidgin however, is the Hausa variety, which is colored by native Hausa lexis, tones, accent and sound patterns (e.g. *yowa*, *haba*, *fa*, *ko*, etc.). For instance, in one of the episodes of the soap, Mohammed exclaims: "I am an oppicer of za law" instead of "I am an officer of the law". The replacement of the sound /f/ with /p/ is common with Hausa speakers while the interdental fricative is replaced with /z/. The Hausa speaker uses the first person singular pronoun when he addresses the second person singular or plural e.g, "I dey crase?" when he means to say "Are you crazy?" Nevertheless, Mohammed's NP is understood by every member of the *Johnson* family and other characters in the soap who come from different geopolitical zones in the country.

Spiff is the adopted son of *The Johnsons* but whose biological father is Mr. Pablo, a friend of the family. He is portrayed as the 'official clown of the family'. He is imbecilic, stupid, illiterate, clownish and speaks mainly NP. Sometimes he tries to imitate the Johnsons' children by speaking English but ends up making a mess of it. He is unable to acquire formal education and ends up as an apprentice photographer. He interjects his Np sometimes with the Yoruba expression 'ope o' (thanks), an indication of both his Yoruba pedigree and the environmental influence of Lagos where the soap is set. That he can only speak NP seems to confirm the popular assumption that NP is for fools, clowns, illiterates and craftsmen (Adegbija 2004, Agheyisi 1984). He portrays the class of Nigerian children who speak only NP and for whom it has become an /L1.

Pablo is another epitome of the caliber of people who speak NP, a lay about, lazy, illiterate and a glutton. He is from the Southwest, attesting to the fact that NP is a lingua franca in every part of the country. He sells 'Agbo', a medicinal herbal drink common with Yoruba people while his NP falls into the Yoruba variety. Evidence of Yoruba in his NP includes the use of expressions such as 'Agbo' and 'ole' (a thief). The sale of 'Agbo' portrays the potency and popular legitimacy of traditional Nigerian herbs (Adesina 1982; Nwambie and Akah 1993; Akinyemi, Mendie, Oyefolu and Coker, 2005). Again Pablo's character further adds credence to the stigma associated with NP as a debased language used by illiterates and pretty traders, who of course belong to the lowest rung of the social ladder. Although he speaks only NP, he understands the English of the educated characters in the soap and is also understood by all.

Abulu is another character in the soap who speaks NP to some extent. He is from the South East, considering his Igbo accent and dress sense. Although he also speaks English, it is obvious that he is semi-illiterate as he code-mixes English with NP. He represents the semi-literate Nigerian who cannot speak English fluently but tries to play along in order to be seen as enlightened and socially accepted. His NP is a semblance of the Igbo variety that is tinted with Igbo accent, sound patterns and lexicon. The three major varieties of NP are obvious in the soap and are therefore represented by Mohammed (Hausa); Pablo (Yoruba) and Abulu (Igbo). This shows that NP is not only spoken in the six geo-political zones in the country, it has also become a language of its own, with different varieties. Evidence that Pidgin is a collage of Standard English and Nigeria's indigenous languages includes the use of expressions such as akpu (Igbo), foofoo (Yoruba), Pepper soup (Naija Delta), kai (Hausa), etc.

NP is the language that unifies speakers of the diverse indigenous languages represented in the soap: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (majority language groups) and Urhobo representing the minority. It is one language that both the young and old; rich and poor; educated, semi-literate and illiterate can relate to, thus giving credence to the argument of its strong candidacy for national language (Balogun 2013). Lucky Johnson, presented as a scientist who produces drugs in his personal laboratory at home, interjects in NP with his wife, Emu, Mohammed, Spiff and Pablo. These are characters who speak NP only. Other characters such as Abulu, Prince, Mama Yakubu, etc. also speak NP freely, maintaining linguistic affinity with other characters, whether educated or not. We see a bilingual coexistence between English and NP, thus portraying the linguistic situation in Nigeria at the moment. Again the Johnson children, Jennifer, Tari and Efe (a medical student) speak NP occasionally despite their competence in English. Agheysisi 1984 affirms that NP has become popular with the elite even when they tend to look down on it. It is only on strictly formal occasions that they are

constrained to speak Standard English as they speak NP in informal contexts. On the contrary, Balogun (2013) observes that elite Nigerians are no longer as opposed to NP as they used to. In a survey he carried out among different categories of Nigerians, a higher percentage of respondents across social classes supported the use of NP in both informal and formal domains.

Deputy, a character who always speaks Standard English, represents the seemingly highly educated Nigerians who speak verbose English and whose identity, regarding geo-political zone or ethnicity, is unknown. He rarely speaks NP as he seems to portray the class of Nigerians who see it as a debased language. A few Nigerians are like Deputy because one cannot tell where they belong since everything about them is English- language, dressing, ideologies, mannerisms, etc. His English is close to Received Pronunciation, without accent and affectations. However, he cannot completely dodge Pidgin as he uses the local Yoruba term for herbal medicine, 'Agbo' in relating with Pablo. This makes him Nigerian no matter how much he tries to deride the languages and their culture. The significance of NP in unifying the multi-ethnic, multicultural and linguistic heterogeneous peoples of Nigeria has been captured in extant literature (Egbokhare 2003; Balogun 2013). Scholars often cite NP's capacity for facilitating national cohesion as its strongest point and ground for upgrading to the status of national or official language as the case may be.

NP in Nigeria does not differ in role from other Pidgins. For instance, Marlow and Giles (2008) reveal an interesting dimension to the use of Pidgin in Hawaii. According to them, Hawaiian Pidgin bridges the gap between linguistically diverse ethnic groups and has resisted marginalization in the socio-political sphere. The same is true of NP as its low official status has not prevented it from spreading over the about 450 (Adegbija 2004) indigenous groups of Nigeria. While all Nigerians cannot speak Standard English due to its elitist status, very few Nigerians are not proficient in Pidgin. There are even cases of Nigerian children who can neither speak their mother tongue nor English, yet are proficient in NP (Elugbe and Omamor 1991; Fasan 2015).

Efe Johnson (called small doctor) is the eldest son and second child of the Johnsons. He is cast as a very brilliant undergraduate student of medicine who is focused and very reasonable. He is perhaps the only child of his parents who uses NP extensively while interjecting with his mother's Urhobo exclamations. His competence in English does not stop him from also speaking NP with Spiff, Pablo, Prince and Abulu, yet he is the brightest of the Johnson children. Ironically, his siblings, Jenifer, Tari and Blessing who speak mainly English are not as academically sound as he is. This debunks the popular belief, by educated Nigerians, that extensive use of NP is inimical to proficiency in English which eventually results in poor academic performance (Adegbija 2004). Efe answers



an Urhobo name and is the only biological child of the Johnsons who codemixes English with Pidgin, while showcasing his mum's Urhobo ethnicity. He is an epitome of educated Nigerian students in tertiary institutions who speak NP, yet it does not affect their proficiency in Standard English or academic performance. We see a case of stable bilingualism reflected here.

NP has become very popular among Nigerian youths, especially in high schools and university campuses. In a survey carried out in a Nigerian University, Ndaji (2020) reveals that the students only speak English when they talk with their lecturers or other management staff. Thereafter, they speak NP extensively, claiming that it is their preferred language due to its structural fluidity, ethnic neutrality and linguistic hybridity. The use of NP by Nigerian students does not only debunk the claim that NP is used by the uneducated and illiterate, it also confirms that it occupies a preferred pride of place by the teeming population of Nigerian youths. Indeed, studies have often submitted that youth language in Nigeria is either Pidgin or Pidgin-based (Egbokhare 2003; Oloruntoba-Oju 2018; Isiaka 2020).

### Sample pidgin expressions used in *The Johnsons*

Some of the NP expressions used by characters in the film are tabulated below. The table shows that the uneducated characters of Emu, Spiff, Pablo and Mohammed are the most users of NP. However, all characters in the film, at one point or the other, speak NP thus supporting the claim that all categories of Nigerians use the language (Igboanusi 2008).

| Pidgin expression                          | Standard English                       | Character     |
|--|--|---------------|
| Comot for there                            | Get away from that place               | Spiff         |
| Make I hear word jare                      | Keep quiet!                            | Emu           |
| I be your guy na                           | I am your bosom friend.                | Tari to Spiff |
| Which kain life be dis?                    | What type of life is this?             | Emu           |
| Na wetin you dey talk comot for mouth?     | What exactly are you saying?           | Emu           |
| Na so the money enter inside water (idiom) | That was how the money got lost        | Emu           |
| Na wetin dey do you?                       | What is the matter with you?           | Abulu         |
| Paster, paster                             | Faster, faster                         | Mohammed      |
| Siddon                                     | Sit down                               | Pablo         |
| Na wa for dis your new change              | This new behavior of yours is strange. | Abulu         |
| Fine fa                                    | I am fine.                             | Mohammed      |
| Make una come                              | Please, come                           | Emu           |



| <b>Pidgin expression</b>              | <b>Standard English</b>                         | <b>Character</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---|------------------|
| I no dey do ko?                       | You mean you don't want to do it?               | Mohammed         |
| Na wa for you                         | You behavior is strange                         | Efe              |
| Agbo                                  | Yoruba herbal mixture                           | Deputy           |
| Wetin I go tell am                    | What will I tell him/her?                       | Abulu            |
| If person go shook money put          | If a person invests money...                    | Emu...           |
| Abeg enter <u>joor</u>                | Please, come in.                                | Emu              |
| I go dash you money                   | I will tip you.                                 | Pablo            |
| I sure say I get am por the strength? | Are you sure you have the strength?             | Mohammed         |
| Opicer of za law                      | Officer of the law                              | Mohammed         |
| I go help am for you                  | I will help you.                                | Mohammed         |
| Food for chop                         | Palatable food                                  | Emu              |
| I be lawyer?                          | Are you a lawyer?                               | Mohammed         |
| Give person wey sabi read             | Give it to the person who can read.             | Pablo            |
| No vex                                | Don't be offended                               | Abulu            |
| Lucky, doo                            | So sad, Lucky                                   | Emu              |
| Wetin haffen?                         | What happened?                                  | Mohammed         |
| Olodo                                 | Yoruba word for dullard, used as part of Pidgin | Lucky            |
| If na Warri                           | If it were Warri                                | Emu              |
| Na wa ...eweleke!                     | Urhobo Pidgin exclamation                       | Emu              |
| Small Oga                             | Young boss                                      | Mohammed         |
| Spiff mumu na follow come             | Spiff's stupidity is inborn                     | Pablo            |
| Akpomena!                             | Urhobo exclamation meaning 'What a life!'       | Emu              |
| Dis one na ojoro                      | This is a trick                                 | Pablo            |
| I go talk o                           | I will reveal the secret                        | Spiff            |
| Upandan                               | Here and there                                  | Abulu            |
| You dey craze                         | Are you crazy?                                  | Jennifer         |
| Wetin be dis?                         | What is this?                                   | Pablo            |
| Wetin dey do you?                     | What is the matter with you?                    | Blessing         |
| Problem dey                           | There is a problem                              | Emu              |
| Mumu                                  | A fool  | Emu              |
| I go woz you slap                     | I will give you a slap                          | Emu              |

| Pidgin expression      | Standard English                 | Character |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Na wetin dey work you? | What the hell is wrong with you? | Emu       |
| Im face don change     | His countenance has changed      | Emu       |
| How you do am?         | How did you do it?               | Spiff     |
| Wetin I go tell am?    | What will I tell him?            | Abulu     |
| Akpo!                  | Urhobo exclamation               | Emu       |
| Oghene                 | Urhobo word for God              | Emu       |
| Comot for there        | Leave there                      | Spiff     |

*Sample NP expressions from The Johnsons*

### ***The Johnsons* and Nigerian Pidgin for national development**

Nigerian Pidgin, as a unifying language for the varied ethnic groups in Nigeria, is an obvious motif in the comedy. As seen in the table above, virtually all characters speak NP; whereas not all can speak English. The characters cut across the three major linguistic groups-Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba- and minority groups-Urhobo-, as well as all ages, social classes and educational statuses and are unified by NP. Bamgbose (2014) stresses the role of language as a tool for national development. A nation, such as Nigeria, cannot achieve sustainable development if its diverse peoples are unable to interact in the same language in all spheres of life. Despite the low status accorded NP, all categories of Nigerians- educated, semi-educated and uneducated, craftsmen, artisans, government employees, students, youths and adults alike speak it, a strong point for its adoption as national language.

Lucky Johnson, who is the main character in the soap, represents the highly educated Nigerian who believes in the agency of English language for development, as expressed in culture, science and medicine. Evidence of this is his first name, Lucky and his surname, Johnson. There is nothing in his name nor in the names of some of his children (Jenifer Johnson and Blessing Johnson) that indicates their Niger Delta or Urhobo nativity. The title of the soap is reflective of educated Nigerians' preference for English names. He belongs to the class of Nigerians whose children Ohiri-Aniche (1997:75) once described as 'Nigerian children who now are wholly neither 'European' nor Nigerian'. Lucky Johnson produces drugs (e.g. Gentimycin) in his laboratory and abhors *Pablo's* 'agbo' (a traditional herbal mixture), which portrays belief in the supremacy of orthodox medicine over indigenous medicine. Lucky speaks English to members of his family, as well as to other illiterate characters. However, despite his high level of education, he marries an illiterate woman, Emu who speaks only NP, an

indication of subtle acceptance of NP. Once in a while, he uses NP expressions. For instance, he once called Spiff, whose character is clownish, 'mumu', an NP terminology for fools, thus confirming that even the educated Nigerian still resorts to NP when the chips are down. Even Deputy, whose ethnic identity is unknown and portrays the educated Nigerian who hardly speaks NP, still uses it, though rarely.

The soap, although set in Lagos, is reflective of the Niger Delta as a catalyst for national cohesion. The language and culture of the Johnson family is portrayed in the names of some of the children, food choices, dressing, and Urhobo linguistic terminologies, e.g. Emu, Efe, Tari, Warri, mingwo, akpo, Ogheneme, etc. The Niger Delta part of Nigeria is home to minority ethnic groups yet the main character, Lucky Johnson, is able to coordinate the other characters, from majority groups, in a peaceful coexistence. Nigeria, as a heterogenous linguistic entity must learn to harness its ethnic multiplicity for maximum benefit by ensuring that majority, minority and small groups are recognized socially, economically, politically and otherwise. All characters are welcome in the Johnsons' home and there is no discrimination between the boss (Niger Del-tan) and the gatekeeper (Northern Nigerian). There is no discrimination among the Johnson children and their adopted brother, Spiff (Yoruba), Pablo (Yoruba), Abulu (Igbo) and Deputy whose ethnic identity is unknown. Evidence of the peaceful coexistence of all the ethnic groups in the soap is implied when *Prince* (an Igbo) begs *Pablo* (a Yoruba) not to allow *Mohammed* (a Hausa) arrest *Abulu* (an Igbo), claiming that they were all one. Another instance of peaceful coexistence is the adoption of *Spiff* (son of a Yoruba man) by *Lucky Johnson* (an Urhobo) and the employment of Mohammed (Hausa) as a gatekeeper. Mohammed is taken as part of the family, as evidenced by the Johnson family's daily feeding of him; treating of his wounds when he had an accident, and special care for his wife, Aisha when she visited from the North. Another evidence is the setting of the soap in Lagos, in the South West, acclaimed the home of Yoruba people, yet characters from all the geopolitical zones live there in unity and harmony. This speaks to the fact that Nigeria belongs to all and all citizens can feel at home in any part of the country. Again some scenes of the soap saw the entire characters going to spend some time with the family of Goodluck, Jennifer's husband in the South-East and were treated to a warm reception. The marriage of Goodluck (an Igbo) and Jennifer (an Urhobo) attests to the significance of inter-tribal marriages in fostering national unity. However, the role of NP in fostering the unity of all characters cannot be over-emphasized. It contributes to the humour that makes the comedy a much sought after one by many Nigerians.

Akinola and Ogunnubi (2020:72) describe Nigeria's film and movie industry as the 'leading promoter of Nigerian culture and values to the world'. Invariably,

the use of NP in *The Johnsons* sends a subtle but decisive message to the nation's language planners. The role of Nollywood in addressing topical issues that can affect the Nigerian society is stressed in Olaoluwa (2018), where he uses the film 'Indian Doctor' to warn Nigerians of the gradual but decisive advent of Indian culture and religious beliefs in Nigeria. *The Johnsons* is primarily meant for entertainment but promotes values that can help to douse ethnic clashes and unrest in Nigeria. The generous use of NP in the soap goes a long way to suggest that the key to national unity and cohesion lies in the language. At a time when the government of Nigeria pays little or no attention to the power of language in national development and achieving sustainable development goals, it is hoped that the soap will be seen beyond a family comedy, as it is a call to give NP a chance. English has not been able to bring about the much needed unity in Nigeria as it is a language for an elitist few.

A language that will bridge the gap among all categories of Nigerians, despite ethnicity, age, status, education, etc. is what the country desperately needs for true nationalism, as well as sustainable development. This, for me, is the major significance of *The Johnsons*. Considering that many of the characters in the soap are from different ethnic groups in Nigeria, who do not understand one another, NP becomes the language through which the complexities of ethnic politics are tackled. Jedlowski (2020:10) captures the complex linguistic equation in Nigeria by 'pointing to the limits of hegemonic narratives about national identity and belonging in the postcolonial context'. If Nigeria truly wants to achieve national unity and cohesion, a language that bridges the gap, across all ethnic groups, should be adopted as national language. Fasan (2015: 10) seems to support this suggestion as he asserts that "the use of Nigerian Pidgin as a national language is more pronounced in the southern parts of Nigeria than in the north where it is more readily spoken in military and paramilitary barracks and non-indigene quarters (Sabon Geri)". Fasan's reference to NP as national language, is a clear understanding of the national linguistic role that it has assumed over the years. Despite the fact that NP does not enjoy official recognition, it is sometimes used in the media by government officials to address citizens especially on issues such as politics, health, agricultural advancements, security, etc. (Balogun 2013). This is suggestive of NP's capacity to reach a wide range of audience. Little wonder then that Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and Egbohkhare (2003) advocate s that NP be given the status of national language.

### **The Nigerian national language debate**

According to Adegija (2004), English is a powerful minority elite language whose status and functions have increased phenomenally over the years. Given that it remains the language of education, and, therefore, the passport to

educational qualifications and upward social mobility, it will remain an attraction to Nigerians. Moreover, it is unlikely that those who used it to attain elite status will be sympathetic to a change that puts their position in jeopardy (Mann1996:104). This informs why it is the elite that are more opposed to the entrenchment of NP as national language. However, Bamgbose (2014) is of the opinion that any meaningful development, whether narrowly or broadly defined, cannot be achieved unless it involves the participation of all in the development process. He further submits that such participation inevitably requires that people are reached and are able to reach others in the language or languages in which they are competent. It therefore means that sustainable development cannot take place in the Nigerian society if the people, who are mostly illiterate, are not involved. Involvement means using a language that they can understand and are proficient in, which further underscores the role of language in national development.

Following from the discussion so far, NP remains a language that almost every category of the Nigerian citizenry is proficient in. It is the lingua franca used widely in Nigeria by all categories of people across different rungs of the social ladder. While Nigerian English is recognized and accepted as a variety of English, NP is regarded as a creolized form of English, which comprises lexicon from Nigeria's indigenous languages and other European languages. It is mainly associated with uneducated people's speech and does not follow any particular rules of English grammar. It has been described as a bastardized form of English with no definite structure, and associated with illiteracy and low status. Parents and teachers chide their wards for speaking it, to the extent that despite the fact that people speak it freely, they still don't want it adopted as a national language due to the stigma associated with it. While some Nigerians feel it is not internationally recognised, some others see it as a painful reminder of colonialism, since it is English-based.

### **Matters arising**

Studies on NP have always submitted that despite its popularity with Nigerians, its candidacy for national language is not strong. Such studies often cite reasons of poor international acceptability, lack of prestige, non-inclusion in the educational system and negative attitude, amongst others (See Elugbe and Omamor 1991; Adegbija 2004; Igboanusi 2008). Educated and elite Nigerians also see it as a debased language which is more popular with illiterates and uneducated people. It is called 'Bad English', without form and structure, and does not follow any grammatical rules and orthography. Other expressions used to describe NP include 'adulterated language,' 'an inferior language,' 'substandard and lesser language,' 'a deviated language form,' 'a marginal language,' 'a bad

language,' 'a language with no history and no native,' among others (Balogun 2012:91). This accounts for while educated Nigerians do not want to be associated with it. Notwithstanding the stigma associated with NP however, based on the discussion above, it is clear that Nigerians still patronize NP despite the poor social status and official recognition. One key point that makes it a strong candidate for national language is that almost every Nigerian already speaks it. It is not the language of any ethnic group, so its choice as national language is not likely to elicit any ethnic agitations, which cannot be avoided if any indigenous language is chosen. This position is in agreement with Deuber (2005)'s submission that NP is the most neutral language spoken in Nigeria. Again, as revealed by Elugbe and Omamor (1991), NP has acquired native speakers in the southern part of Nigeria. Currently, many young people continue to speak it as their L1. We can therefore see NP as more of a language of unification among the diverse peoples of Nigeria than English. English is mainly spoken by the few, powerful, educated and elite Nigerians; whereas NP is spoken by all. The fact that NP is an admixture of English and many indigenous languages somewhat makes it domesticated and nativised, thereby contesting the claim that it is not native to Nigeria.

Igboanusi (2008:1) carried out a survey to explore the plausibility of empowering Nigerian Pidgin 'by raising its value through status planning'. His results showed that despite the large number of Nigerians who speak it, an equally large number of educated Nigerians did not support its use in education. According to him, such Nigerians did not see any economic value in it and felt that it would have negative implications on indigenous languages and English language proficiency. The fact that NP is not standardized constitutes part of the negative attitude towards it. It has no form or structure and of course it is not internationally recognized. It is English-based and thus remains a painful reminder of colonialism and linguistic slavery. The negative attitude of educated Nigerians towards NP has impeded any consideration for it as national language by the Nigerian government, although some linguists maintain that the proposal is worth considering.

### Concluding remarks

The study advocates for Nigerian Pidgin (NP) to be officially recognized as Nigeria's national language, using the comedy, *The Johnsons* as reference. The comedy seems to be advocating for the consideration of NP as national language with its extensive use by different calibres of characters. NP plays the role of a unifying language in the soap as all characters that cut across ages, social statuses and ethnicity are in peaceful coexistence. This is suggestive of the strong candidacy of NP for the Nigerian national language debate. All that the lan-

guage needs is linguistic reengineering, which will involve both status and corpus planning, to improve its social acceptability and international intelligibility. Following from Igboanusì (2008), empowering NP is a challenge for status planning; however, this challenge can be surmounted by government addressing the pressing issues of standardization, orthography, form, structure, modernisation and international acceptability. Attaining a truly sovereign state is the most important thing we need in Nigeria as a whole and the role of a national language in achieving such a status cannot be over emphasized. The country has to revisit the national language debate and give NP a chance. Nigeria is confronted by ethnic crises that border on language conflicts, which are often explosive. These conflicts, one way or the other, have affected national development since sustainable development can only take place in a serene and peaceful environment. This is what NP has achieved in Nigeria: unifying the various linguistically diverse peoples. I argue that English has not been able to play the role of unification, as it is the language of a privileged few, who constitute a minute percentage of the population. The ubiquity of NP in the media, streets, educational institutions, political campaigns and ethnic interactions, should draw more attention of the government and language planners to it. It also serves as a unifying language among Nigerians in the diaspora, where it is more commonly known as *Naija* (an NP spelling of Nigeria). I submit, therefore, that there is need to revisit the national language question, by considering the candidacy of NP for sustainable national development.

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