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# Language and Identities in Nigeria

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**Abstract**
Language identity in Nigeria is a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon shaped by ethnic diversity, colonial legacy, and postcolonial nation-building, with over 500 indigenous languages and their various dialects enriching the linguistic landscape while reflecting local identity, heritage, and regional belonging within the broader national context. Some previous studies explore the link between language, identity, and power but they often overlook how evolving linguistic identities influence cultural cohesion and national integration, which this study addresses. The paper examines how language identities are constructed, negotiated, and transformed across Nigeria's multilingual landscape, focusing on both major and minority languages and their sociopolitical and cultural implications using a qualitative desk-based documentary research design and historical methods. This paper is anchored on the Fishman's theory of language and ethnicity, to examine Nigerian multilingualism and highlighting language role in identity formation and nation-building in postcolonial Nigeria. Consequently, the findings reveal that English, indigenous languages, and Nigerian Pidgin act as markers of ethnicity, social hierarchy, and collective identity, with Pidgin fostering national cohesion. The paper asserts that understanding and integrating Nigeria's multilingualism is vital for promoting inclusive national identity. Accordingly, five recommendations are proposed: Implementing inclusive language policies in education to benefit students and educators, promoting Pidgin English in public discourse for ethnic communities, supporting minority languages for local communities, integrating multilingual literacy programs in schools for students and teachers, and encouraging research on language practices for scholars and government policymakers.

**Keywords:** Indigenous languages, Language identity, Multilingualism, Pidgin English, Sociolinguistic cohesion

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## Introduction

Nigeria, a multi-ethnic country on the West African coast, has over 150 ethnic groups with diverse indigenous languages and cultures. During British colonial rule, missionaries introduced Western education through English, which subsequently became the official language of the colonial administration (Offiong, 2019). Etymologically, the concept of language derives from the Latin *lingua* (meaning tongue, speech, or language) and the Old French language (denoting speech, conversation, or the expression of a people), thus indicating that language fundamentally refers to structured communication among members of a community through articulated, meaningful sounds. Language identity in Nigeria represents a complex sociolinguistic reality shaped by ethnic diversity, colonial influence, and postcolonial struggles for unity. With over 500 indigenous languages, the nation reflects a multilingual landscape where language embodies both communication and cultural power. Scholars such as Chukwu & Chima (2024); Ajepe & Ademowo (2016), emphasise how English, as a colonial legacy, dominates official and educational spheres while indigenous tongues remain marginalised.

However, many studies neglect the evolving nature of linguistic identities in Nigeria's contemporary urban and socio-political contexts, particularly the growing role of Nigerian Pidgin English language as a unifying medium. This paper bridges the gap by examining how evolving linguistic identities in Nigeria influence national integration and cultural cohesion in a postcolonial context. The paper adopts Fishman's theory of language and ethnicity to examine Nigerian multilingualism and its implications for identity and nation-building, viewing language as a socially defined system shaped by norms, attitudes, and contextual use (Fishman & García, 2010). However, the term "ethnic" derived from the Greek *ethnos* meaning people or group, denotes collective identity, while "ethnicity" is a relatively recent concept requiring distinction from related notions such as nationality, culture, and race (Baumann, 2004). The paper aims to explore how language identities are formed and reshaped within Nigeria's multilingual and postcolonial setting, highlighting their impact on cultural cohesion and national integration, while also addressing the gap between language policy and linguistic reality.

## Historical Evolution of Language in Nigeria

Indigenous languages in Nigeria preserve cultural knowledge, values, beliefs, and traditional worldviews. Through oral traditions, proverbs, rituals, and communal practices, they transmit heritage across generations and sustain collective identity, functioning therefore as vital mediums for preserving and interpreting cultural heritage. Before colonial intervention, Nigeria exhibited extensive linguistic diversity, with numerous indigenous languages serving as primary means of communication and cultural transmission. At the British arrival in the late nineteenth century, Nigeria's pre-colonial era featured diverse political systems, including centralised states such as the Yoruba Kingdom and Sokoto Empire, as well as decentralised, stateless societies like the Igbo (Bassidi, 2022). Notwithstanding, African societies had developed sophisticated languages and cultural systems that sustained social, economic, and political cohesion, but colonialism imposed foreign languages on these communities (Ogai & Williams-Umeaba, 2023). These languages sustained social cohesion, conveyed cultural values, and structured political relations within communities. Thus, indigenous communication systems reflected deeply rooted social structures and formed the basis of communal and ethnic identity. Colonialism reshaped Nigeria's linguistic landscape by establishing English as the dominant language of administration, education, and governance, thereby marginalising indigenous languages in formal institutions. Consequently, English became associated with power, prestige, and social mobility, reshaping patterns of identity, social interaction, and access to opportunities by creating a hierarchical linguistic order.

Additionally, in many postcolonial contexts, linguistic access is itself a source of inequality, as proficiency in former colonial languages such as English and French often determines access to information, opportunities, political positions, and public-sector employment (Wolf & Igboanusi,

2006). Colonialism brought a profound transformation as European powers imposed their languages, religions, and cultural values, creating a linguistic hierarchy that marginalised African languages in official and educational spheres and largely restricted their use to domestic and oral contexts (Young, 2020). Moreover, the impact of colonialism on motherhood in Africa illustrates shifting communication styles, as centuries of colonial rule imposed hegemonic structures that disrupted traditional community interactions (Igboin, 2011). While English became associated with power and social mobility, local languages were confined to informal domains. Consequently, these policies reshaped social relations and fostered lasting tensions between indigenous identities and the colonial language.

The amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 unified diverse ethno-linguistic groups, shaping the concept of "many voices, one Nigeria" (Okonkwo, 2022), and the postcolonial Nigeria continues to negotiate the tension between the prestige of English and the cultural significance of indigenous languages. This linguistic consciousness has strengthened efforts to preserve indigenous languages as vital expressions of cultural identity and national development. Contemporary language practices therefore reflect an ongoing attempt to reconcile colonial linguistic legacies with indigenous identity and national cohesion. After independence, Nigeria sought to balance its multilingual reality with national integration by promoting English alongside selected indigenous languages in education and governance. Although these policies aimed to preserve cultural identity, but, they often favoured dominant languages, thereby marginalising minority tongues.

Language spreads through imposition or assimilation, and those from monolingual states often struggle to grasp the linguistic complexities of a multilingual society like Nigeria (Osaji, 2017); but today, English is Nigeria's official language, while Nigerian Pidgin serves as a neutral lingua franca, and Arabic and French have more limited influence (Ogunmodimu, 2015). Language in Nigeria continues to evolve through migration, urbanisation, education, media, and sustained linguistic contact. As speakers shift between indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin across contexts, they continually negotiate their identities, reflecting the fluid nature of identity in Nigeria's increasingly interconnected multilingual society. Notwithstanding, language politics continue to reflect the tension between national unity and cultural diversity in shaping Nigeria's national identity.

## Multilingualism and Ethnic Identities

Nigeria's multilingual landscape includes major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, alongside numerous minority languages. While the major languages receive greater institutional, educational, and media support, minority languages often have limited recognition and resources, thereby affecting cultural visibility, social participation, and the preservation of community identities. Significantly, a man's perception, lifestyle, and overall evaluation of life are largely shaped and controlled by his language; particularly the language of his thoughts and dreams (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999). Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are Nigeria's dominant languages, each representing significant ethnic, cultural, and regional identities. These languages serve not only as communication tools but also as symbols of social belonging, heritage, and political influence within their respective communities.

The world is made up of distinct societies, each defined by its unique way of life; thus, within Nigeria, groups such as the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba; differing in language, culture, and history; constitute separate societies within a single nation (Bisong & Effumbe, 2019). However, language barriers significantly contribute to social fragmentation and interethnic tensions (Mazrui, 1997). Definitely, language serves as an important marker of ethnicity and cultural belonging by connecting individuals to shared histories, traditions, and communal values. Nigerians often use indigenous languages to express solidarity and affirm their affiliation with particular ethnic communities. Thus, language contributes significantly to the construction and maintenance of

cultural identity within Nigeria's diverse society. Accordingly, mastery and use of these languages often confer social recognition and facilitate participation in both local and national discourses.

Nigerian languages exhibit extensive dialectal variation shaped by geographical location, historical development, and patterns of social interaction. These dialectal differences enable speakers to express regional affiliation while maintaining broader ethnic and linguistic identities. Thus, dialects serve as important markers of local identity, cultural heritage, and social solidarity. Despite Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity, many minority languages face marginalisation due to limited institutional support and socio-political dominance of major languages. Nigeria's multilingualism reflects its complex ethnic diversity, historical migrations, and sociocultural development, with the three dominant languages; Hausa in the north, Yoruba in the southwest, and Igbo in the southeast, corresponding to the country's major ethnic groups (Blench, 2012).

While these languages function as regional lingua francas that enhance communication, cultural identity, and social cohesion, Nigeria also hosts numerous minority languages; such as Kanuri, Tiv, Ibibio, and Edo; which remain vital to the distinct identities and daily lives of their respective ethnic communities. However, due to its colonial legacy, English remains the official language and primary medium of instruction, often overshadowing indigenous languages (Ogu, 1992). Also, its dominance in government, education, and business establishes a linguistic hierarchy that marginalises indigenous language speakers and reinforces social inequalities (Adegbija, 1996). This marginalisation threatens the survival of smaller languages and the cultural identities they embody, as younger generations increasingly shift to dominant tongues for education and economic opportunities. Therefore, minority languages are often at risk of erosion, highlighting the unequal dynamics of language power in Nigeria. Linguistic marginalisation occurs when minority languages receive limited institutional recognition, educational support, or public visibility, thereby reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and unequal representation. As a result, equitable language policies are essential for protecting linguistic rights and fostering inclusive national participation.

## Language, Power, and Social Inequality

Language is a key source of social power, shaping access to education, employment, governance, and other opportunities. In Nigeria, English proficiency often signals education and social status, whereas indigenous languages primarily express ethnic and cultural identity, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies and inequalities. Disparities, biases, discrimination, inequity, and unfairness characterise human societies, as societal structures have historically distributed resources, recognition, and linguistic access unequally among groups (Edwards, 2006). Similarly, language proficiency in Nigeria is closely linked to socioeconomic status and access to institutional opportunities. Also, proficiency in Standard English can enhance educational attainment, employment prospects, and participation in public life, while limited proficiency may constrain social mobility. Thus, linguistic competence can both expand opportunities and reproduce existing class distinctions. Unfortunately, Nigeria's current language policy arguably disadvantages minority languages because education is primarily delivered in English, while major indigenous languages are taught in schools, thereby encouraging minority-language speakers to acquire dominant languages at the expense of their own linguistic heritage (Igboanusi, 2008).

Linguistic discrimination occurs when individuals are judged or excluded because of their language, accent, or dialect. It can limit minority-language speakers' recognition and participation when dominant linguistic forms prevail in education, employment, and public institutions; therefore, addressing it is crucial for promoting equality and social inclusion. The linguistic rights generally concern the recognition, promotion, and development of indigenous languages, with government playing a central role in either restricting or advancing such rights through language policies and institutional support (Blommaert, 2005); but poor implementation of government policies in Nigeria often stems not from their quality or the competence of those implementing them, but from their foreignness to the people and consequent lack of acceptability (Odoje, 2013); whereas, indigenous

languages facilitate effective communication, information access, education, and health awareness, particularly within minority communities. Paradoxically, the debate on linguistic rights encompasses the marginalisation of endoglossic languages by exoglossic languages and the dominance of major languages over minority ones, particularly in education (Nyati-Ramahobo, 2006). Consequently, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law requires the development and promotion of minority languages as vehicles for education and cultural preservation (Aikawa, 2001). Language rights recognise individuals' and communities' legitimate interests in maintaining and using their languages. In Nigeria's multilingual context, protecting linguistic diversity promotes cultural participation, equal representation, and belonging, thereby strengthening citizenship and national cohesion.

Language functions as a key indicator of ethnic affiliation, religious orientation, and regional identity in Nigeria, shaping social interactions and group loyalties. Language fundamentally shapes thought, perception, and social reality; therefore, ideas are not purely rational or independent but are mediated through grammatical structures that influence how individuals interpret and categorise the world (Elugbe, 1999). Language contact in Nigeria arises from sustained interaction among indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin, resulting in borrowing, adaptation, and linguistic hybridisation, and such contact reflects Nigeria's cultural diversity while continually reshaping linguistic practices and social identities. Similarly, language serves as the identity of a people, tribe, or nation, distinguishing them within a shared speech community; thus, it is not merely a tool for communication but a defining marker of collective belonging (Akinsola, Idumu & Adegoke, 2017).

However, ethnicity refers to the strategic use or mobilisation of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in contexts of competition, conflict, or cooperation (Osaghae, 1995), while, Ukiwo (2005), contends that "ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by deliberate human actions, manifesting in both conflict and cooperation; thus, its expressions do not always yield negative outcomes". Ironically, the artificial union created by European imperialists, which combined diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, intensified ethnic divisions and hindered Nigeria's development and Vision 2020 goals; thus, addressing this issue requires focusing on language as a core element of ethnic identity. Amid the coexistence of numerous major and minor languages, diverse ethnic groups, and foreign influences, identity crises inevitably emerge, making it difficult to sustain a clear linguistic identity within a system also marked by interconnected linguistic, ethnic, political, and educational challenges (Udoh & Emmanuel, 2020).

## Code-Switching, Language Mixing, and Social Identity

In Nigeria's multilingual context, code-switching and language mixing are common linguistic strategies that reflect fluid social identities and situational adaptation. Code-switching is common among Nigerians who shift between indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin according to context and communicative purpose. It enables speakers to express solidarity, authority, cultural affiliation, and social status while constructing and negotiating multiple identities in multilingual interactions. However, individuals often use language strategically to signal belonging, establish trust, or navigate intergroup relations within the country's complex sociopolitical landscape. As a result, linguistic choice both reflects and reinforces social boundaries, influencing patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Code-switching is the deliberate use of two or more languages or dialects within a conversation; once viewed as a deficiency, it is now understood as a strategic tool for social and communicative purposes (Udoh, 2025). Furthermore, from a pragmatic standpoint, code-switching serves as a strategic conversational tool that enables speakers to emphasise meaning, clarify intent, and signal group identity, thereby facilitating contextualization and meaning negotiation (Auer, 1998). This indicates that language switching is context-driven rather than random, as speakers strategically shift between languages to enhance understanding, build rapport, and maintain

engagement in communication. Moreover, Stylistic studies show that code-switching, even when ungrammatical; serves as a tool for negotiating identity within specific social contexts (Heller, Watts & Auer, 2007). Likewise, the concepts of normal and altered replication help explain how foreign elements integrate into a host language, distinguishing loanwords from code-switches (Backus, 1996). Meanwhile, in bilingual communities, informal speech often incorporates features such as insertional and alternational code-switching, loan translation, and grammatical interference, as speakers navigate multiple linguistic systems. These shifts not only reflect cultural hybridity but also demonstrate adaptability, as individuals blend languages to suit varying social contexts and communicative demands.

Code-switching functions as a strategic linguistic resource that reflects social tensions and power relations, facilitates identity and group dynamics, and reinforces English dominance over indigenous languages in Nigeria (Bamiro, 2006). However, far from indicating linguistic deficiency, code-switching is a strategic and culturally grounded communicative resource, especially in Nigerian society, highlighting multilingualism as an asset and underscoring the need for further research into its impact on education, media, and social interaction in a globalised world. Nigerian Pidgin English, also known as Anglo-Nigerian Pidgin or "Broken English", facilitates interethnic communication and enables marginalised groups to express protest and resistance (Okorie & Bamidele, 2016). Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) emerged in the seventeenth century through contact between local communities and Portuguese traders and, given Nigeria's linguistic diversity, has subsequently developed into a widely used lingua franca (Babalola & Taiwo, 2009). It is more widely spoken than English, the officially recognised lingua franca, and has greater sociostratal depth, particularly among the lower social strata, who prefer it as their primary means of communication. Opeibi (2007), Gunn (2008), and Odedeji (2013) argue that the language's idiomatic richness enables it to transcend cultural barriers and foster broader identification. Its idiomatic character further enhances its appeal among diverse cultural groups. Additionally, it serves as an indispensable lingua franca because it is perceived as socially, politically, and ethnically neutral (Mensah, 2012). Strategically, speakers frequently alternate between indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin to negotiate social roles, express solidarity, or assert status. Hence, these linguistic practices illustrate the dynamic and performative nature of identity in daily communication, highlighting the interplay between language and social positioning.

## Language, Identity, and National Development

Nigeria's linguistic diversity offers opportunities for cultural exchange but also poses challenges to national cohesion. Recognising and respecting diverse linguistic identities can promote mutual understanding and reduce perceptions of cultural exclusion. It is noteworthy that the importance of sociolinguistic variables was emphasised at the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa held at Harare, Zimbabwe, 17-21 March 1998 concerning the Problems and Prospects of Using African Languages in Education; the final report recognises language as essential to personality formation, group and national consciousness, and cultural development (Chimhundu, 2002). Undoubtedly, language is a fundamental vehicle of thought and communication and a crucial instrument of social, cultural, political, economic, educational, industrial, and technological development. Therefore, Nigerian leaders should employ inclusive language that strengthens national cohesion, preserves cultural diversity, and promotes effective communication and unity among citizens, since language ultimately binds society together (Omotoyinbo, 2016). Accordingly, inclusive multilingualism can transform linguistic diversity from a potential source of division into a valuable national asset, thereby fostering social cohesion, mutual understanding, and sustainable national unity.

Significantly, language shapes how Nigerians engage in political, educational, and civic life. When citizens can access public information and institutions through familiar linguistic forms, their participation and sense of belonging are enhanced. In a democratic society, citizens should have the

freedom and responsibility to determine what happens in their religious, social, and political affairs. Obviously, language is inherently political because it shapes human interaction, while political processes, in turn, influence the power, status, and values attached to language in society (Spolsky, 2004). Effective language planning can manage Nigeria's linguistic diversity while promoting communication and national cohesion. By supporting both major and minority languages alongside a shared lingua franca, it can reduce linguistic exclusion, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen an inclusive national identity. The National Policy on Education, (FGN, 1981), recognises language as vital to education, cultural preservation, and national unity, encouraging children to learn Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba alongside their mother tongue. Therefore, inclusive language practices can foster more effective, equitable, and meaningful civic engagement. However, minority communities that adopt another community's language often develop a strong sense of belonging and solidarity with its speakers. In the same vein, government can build on this existing linguistic bond by creating initiatives that strengthen social cohesion and foster closer relationships among the communities. This is explained by additive bilingualism, whereby one language remains dominant without threatening the other, enabling learners to acquire and use both languages effectively (Merrill & Lapkin, 2014).

Politically, effective language planning can promote education, preserve cultural heritage, enhance economic participation, and foster social development. Policies that strategically balance English, indigenous languages, and Nigerian Pidgin can strengthen communication while safeguarding linguistic diversity, preserving natural resources and ecosystems so that future generations can meet their own needs without compromising environmental integrity. According to the United Nations, sustainable development rests on three interrelated pillars: economic development, social development, and environmental protection (Mensah, 2019). These three dimensions must be conceptualised, planned, and implemented collectively by government to achieve sustainable development, which inherently carries a moral dimension requiring responsible leadership from government and active responsibility from citizens. Without indigenous-language education for the largely English-nonliterate population, sustainable development remains elusive; therefore, government leaders and citizens alike share responsibility for promoting education in the language of the people (Alamu, 2017).

The Nigerian language policies seek to balance English with the preservation of indigenous languages; however, uneven implementation often limits minority languages' recognition and institutional support, making inclusive policies essential for protecting linguistic rights and ensuring equitable participation in national life. Additionally, multilingual education enhances learning by connecting instruction with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It also preserves indigenous knowledge, sustains languages across generations, and promotes cultural continuity and social inclusion. The political manipulation and circumvention of the National Policy on Education (NPE) have undermined the effective implementation of Nigeria language policy, largely due to negative attitudes towards indigenous languages, avoidance practices, and the pervasive dominance of English (Kolawole, 2016). However, purposeful language planning is crucial to achieving inclusive and sustainable national development.

Multilingualism has often hindered national cohesion in African countries, including Nigeria, where the difficulty of selecting a unifying language has encouraged the adoption of English as the official language, thereby making it dominant in education and government while marginalising indigenous languages. The situation is further compounded by the fact that most rural residents are not literate in the official language. Uwaezuoke (2018), argues that the marginalisation of indigenous languages hinders national integration by alienating citizens from government activities and reducing their awareness and participation in national development. Nigeria's future nationhood will continue to be shaped by the interaction between linguistic diversity and national identity. Rather than viewing multilingualism solely as a challenge, policies can harness it for cultural

expression, social inclusion, and national development, thereby strengthening national unity while preserving the country's diverse cultural heritage.

Ethnicity refers to a distinct population group within a larger society whose culture differs from that of the mainstream population (Wan & Vanderwerf, 2009). According to (Mbalisi, 2017), ethnicity is a social phenomenon characterised by interaction within communal groups whose boundaries are culturally defined, although such groups are not necessarily homogeneous. Ethnicity refers to a group bound by a shared identity, ancestry, language, belief system, and cultural heritage, despite minor internal variations. In Nigeria, for instance, the Yoruba share a common communal identity while exhibiting linguistic and cultural differences, just as the Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Ijaw, and other ethnic groups maintain distinct identities and collective interests. Nigeria's political structure fostered an inherent power struggle among ethnic groups, as those in power sought to retain their dominance by exploiting tribal sentiments, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s (Achebe, 2012). Nigeria's leadership challenges are closely linked to its linguistic complexities, as the association between language and ethnic identity can reinforce divisions and hinder effective national leadership. The paper therefore recommends recognising and developing all Nigerian indigenous languages equally, while promoting Nigerian Pidgin as a complementary medium for fostering national identity and unity.

## English and Nigerian Pidgin: Linguistic Prestige Politics

English as a language of power, education, and governance; hence, it occupies a dominant position in Nigeria as the language of government, formal education, and official communication. Its historical association with colonial administration has endowed it with prestige and authority, often making proficiency in English a marker of social mobility and elite status. Moreover, English in Nigeria dominates key sectors; government, education, media, commerce, and religion, but its widespread use has weakened mother-tongue education and endangered indigenous languages (Aboh, 2022). More significantly, Nigeria's constitutional recognition of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in legislative affairs has been criticised as reductive, while the adoption of English as the official language is viewed as exclusionary and a perpetuation of neocolonialism (Orekan, 2010; Bamgbose, 2014). Nonetheless, Nigerian Pidgin stands as a strong candidate for a national lingua franca due to its ethnic and political neutrality, widespread usage, and growing recognition as a fully developed language, with millions of native and second-language speakers (Osoba, 2021). Nigerian Pidgin facilitates communication among people from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Its widespread use in informal interactions, commerce, entertainment, and popular media promotes interethnic communication and strengthens social cohesion. Culturally, language mirrors societal stability and change, as cultural and social dynamics shape attitudes that evolve into ideologies and identity (Egbokhare, 2021), however, language dominance is closely linked to economic, technological, and cultural power (Crystal, 2018). Undoubtedly, English facilitates nationwide communication while reinforcing access to political, economic, and educational opportunities; however, Nigerian Pidgin remains widely used in everyday communication.

In Nigeria's linguascape, English varies in pronunciation and structure across ethnic groups such as the Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba, and has been domesticated through Nigerian Pidgin, enabling speakers to express their socio-cultural worldview and claim ownership of the language. Unlike English and the three major indigenous languages, Nigerian Pidgin is viewed as a quintessential Nigerian language because of its perceived neutrality across geographical, ethnic, and social boundaries and its widespread use (Olusegun-Joseph, 2014). Hence, Nigerian Pidgin serves as a lingua franca across linguistically and ethnically diverse communities, particularly in universities and metropolitan centres (Deuber & Hinrichs, 2007; Egbokhare, 2003). Nigerian Pidgin, beyond serving as a common means of communication, contributes to national identity by bridging ethnic and linguistic divides and promoting a shared sense of belonging. Since the end of the Cold War, migration and digitalisation have transformed the global linguistic landscape, spreading Nigerian

and other West African English varieties, including pidgins and *creoles*, into new regions (Mair, 2021). Urbanisation and migration bring speakers of diverse languages into sustained social and economic contact, fostering language adaptation, code-switching, and flexible linguistic identities. Consequently, urban multilingualism illustrates how mobility reshapes language use and identity formation in contemporary Nigeria.

Sociologically, Nigerian Pidgin has emerged as a widely spoken lingua franca that transcends ethnic and regional boundaries, fostering intergroup communication and social cohesion, also a vital and evolving language, widely used for informal communication, media, and literature across diverse groups in Nigeria (Usoro & Nsit, 2024). Although Pidgin is widely used in Nigeria, its status and usefulness remain contested, shaping how speakers perceive their linguistic identity. Unlike English, Pidgin is deeply rooted in local culture and everyday experience, providing a sense of shared identity among diverse communities. Thus, the rise of Nigerian Pidgin reflects efforts to construct a more inclusive national identity while balancing the influence of dominant languages.

In Nigeria, language use reflects a sociolinguistic hierarchy shaped by class distinctions, where linguistic choices both signal and reinforce social status and identity. Sometimes, proficiency in English often signals higher socio-economic status and educational attainment, whereas indigenous languages and Pidgin may be associated with local identity or lower social prestige. Historically, Nigerian Pidgin, though part of the wider West African Pidgin family, is more suitable as a national language due to its broad acceptance and neutrality, unlike Sierra Leone's Krio, which was rejected for its elite association (Ehondor, 2020). Digital media are creating new spaces for Nigerians to use, adapt, and promote indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin. Social media, online entertainment, and digital communication are accelerating linguistic innovation while extending language practices beyond traditional settings.

The digital platforms are increasingly shaping contemporary linguistic identities and forms of cultural expression. Despite the dominance of English through education, media, and globalisation, Nigerian Pidgin remains a widespread inter-ethnic communicative code understood across all ethnic groups in Nigeria (Balogun, 2013; Bernini, 2013). In Nigeria, language shapes citizenship, inclusion, and access to opportunities; thus, equitable multilingual policies are vital for national unity and inclusive development. Moreover, it functions as both a tool of communication and shaping interactions across different societal groups. Notwithstanding, the proposal to elevate and adopt Pidgin as a formal or parliamentary language is neither novel nor without precedent. In fact, countries such as Papua New Guinea and Tanzania have already integrated similar linguistic forms into their parliamentary systems, demonstrating its viability and relevance in multilingual societies.

## Popular Culture and the Reconstruction of Language Identity

Popular culture shapes and reconstructs language identities by providing platforms for expressing and negotiating linguistic practices and cultural values. In Nigeria's multilingual society, music, film, and social media enhance indigenous-language visibility while fostering interaction among indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin. Thus, popular culture contributes to the preservation, adaptation, and reconstruction of contemporary Nigerian language identities. Nigerian music provides a significant platform for expressing linguistic and cultural identities by combining indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin in diverse musical genres. Towards the turn of the twentieth century, Nigerian hip-hop gained popularity through linguistic strategies such as indirection, ambiguity, code-mixing, punning, and double meanings, enabling artists to express global orientations and construct multiple identities (Tosin-Gbogi, 2016). However, music and language are mutually reinforcing, particularly in Africa, where tonality is intrinsic to language; thus, music both shapes and reinforces language (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2018.

Through lyrics, performance, and popular circulation, musicians reflect the experiences, values, and aspirations of different communities while making indigenous linguistic forms more visible.

The arts signify fragmented identities and nationalities, while Africana popular music transcends real and imagined boundaries (Adegoke, 2011). Moreover, code-switching localises and globalises popular music, while blending colloquial Arabic and French in Rai lyrics enhances their rhetorical and aesthetic effects through rhythm, contrast, parallelism, and repetition (Davies & Bentahila, 2006). Similarly, code-switching and translation reinforce identity by juxtaposing languages as in-group markers, stylistic devices, and means of excluding outsiders (Davies & Bentahila, 2008). Accordingly, music serves as a powerful medium of cultural continuity and social cohesion, enabling individuals and communities to preserve cultural values, strengthen their sense of belonging, and negotiate diverse identities within Nigeria's complex multilingual society.

Nollywood reflects Nigeria's linguistic diversity by incorporating indigenous languages alongside English and Nigerian Pidgin in films and other audiovisual productions. Through dialogue, characterisation, storytelling, and cultural settings, filmmakers represent different ethnic communities while exposing wider audiences to diverse linguistic traditions. Nollywood audiovisual content on social media platforms such as YouTube serves purposes beyond entertainment, education, and information (Fadipe & Olawuyi, 2024). As repositories of indigenous languages, cultures, and traditions, Nollywood films promote cultural integration in Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multilingual society (Kuku & Fadipe, 2026). Despite their benefits, Nigeria's multilingualism and multiculturalism are widely recognised as challenges to national unity and integration (Mathe & Motsatthebe, 2026); it is evident in secessionists and ethnic nationalists who are continually calling for Nigeria's ethnic groups to pursue self-determination rather than remain in what they perceive as an unproductive union. Nonetheless, Nollywood transcends entertainment by serving as a significant medium for preserving cultural heritage, enhancing the visibility of indigenous languages, and shaping and reconstructing contemporary Nigerian identities.

Stand-up comedy is a phenomenal recreation of human experiences on stage in a way that is humorous, and it is a genre of popular culture which thrives on the production of humorous utterances (Filani, 2015). Nigerian comedy frequently employs accents, dialects, code-switching, indigenous expressions, and Nigerian Pidgin to portray diverse social, ethnic, and regional identities. Comedians transform linguistic differences into humorous performances that reflect everyday experiences, social relationships, and cultural tensions across communities. This comic genre features stand-up comedians who entertain audiences through humorous stories, one-liners, jokes, and anecdotes, commonly known as "bits" (Schwarz, 2010). Nigerian Pidgin is central to Nigerian stand-up comedy, providing entertainment and social commentary while enabling creative linguistic expression and identity negotiation. As a hybrid of English and indigenous languages, it adapts and simplifies English grammatical structures, thereby facilitating communication across diverse social and cultural contexts (Raheem, 2018). Despite many Nigerian stand-up comedians being university graduates and proficient in English, they often prefer Nigerian Pidgin to entertain audiences and present serious national issues in a more informal and accessible manner. Nigerian Pidgin has relatively few social and linguistic restrictions, making it a preferred medium for interethnic communication among people from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Social media platforms have created new spaces where Nigerians creatively combine indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin in everyday digital communication. Through abbreviations, slangs, code-switching, memes, and other emerging linguistic practices, users construct identities that reflect changing social and cultural realities. Language is a fundamental human attribute that distinguishes humans from animals, serving diverse functions, including communication, self-expression, social interaction, learning, personal development, and cultural transmission, given the close relationship between language and culture. Social media facilitates global interaction among people and languages, but the dominance of English increasingly threatens indigenous languages, whose loss also undermines linguistic identity and diversity (Onadipe-Shalom, 2024). Language maintenance refers to efforts by community members to preserve their established language use and stabilise endangered languages (Hoffman, 1991). Unfortunately, many

communities recognise language endangerment only when intervention becomes difficult; hence, language maintenance strategically strengthens and empowers local languages, particularly through their use on social media (Dixon, 1997). Visser (2014), highlights digital technology as a vital tool for language maintenance and revitalisation, enabling cultural and heritage institutions to engage audiences meaningfully and sustainably. However, digital popular culture is increasingly reshaping language use by expanding the visibility of indigenous and emerging linguistic forms, facilitating cross-cultural interaction, and creating new modes of cultural affiliation and identity negotiation among contemporary Nigerians.

## Conclusion

This study examined how language identities in Nigeria are being constructed, negotiated, and transformed within a multilingual and postcolonial context, while highlighting their ongoing influence on cultural cohesion and national integration. By analysing the interactions between indigenous languages, English, and Nigerian Pidgin, the paper demonstrated that linguistic practices are functioning not only as communication tools but also as markers of ethnicity, social hierarchy, and collective identity. Accordingly, the study has contributed to academia by bridging the gap between language policy and sociolinguistic reality, while providing insights into how inclusive language planning is supporting the promotion of national unity in a diverse linguistic landscape.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for the benefit of students, scholars, community leaders, and policymakers, and should be implemented across all levels and arms of government responsible for language policy, particularly within the education sector.

i. Implement inclusive language policies in education to strengthen indigenous language use, benefiting students, educators, and policymakers by preserving cultural heritage.

ii. Promote Nigerian Pidgin and other lingua francas in media and public discourse to enhance national cohesion, benefiting diverse ethnic communities and social institutions.

iii. Provide targeted support and resources for minority languages to prevent marginalisation, benefiting local communities, cultural organisations, and researchers.

iv. Incorporate multilingual literacy programs in schools to foster social integration and identity awareness, benefiting students, teachers, and curriculum developers.

v. Encourage research on evolving language practices to inform policy and planning, benefiting scholars, government agencies, and language advocacy groups.

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