

Naija and the Construction of National Identity on a Virtual Community

Saheed Omotayo Okesola^{1*}

¹Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Email: soraheem@oauife.edu.ng

Submission Track:

Received: 03-03-2026, Final Revision: 22-05-2026, Available Online: 01-06-2026

Copyright © 2026 Authors



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

ABSTRACT

Both individually and collectively, people hold in high esteem things that make them unique at different points in intergroup interaction. People and groups pride themselves on the traits that set them apart from others (Harwood 2006). They hold the idea of identity negotiation and maintenance dear in their minds and continuously strive to make subtle statements about these various shades of identity. It is against the aforementioned that the present study examines how Naija is deployed in the construction of national identity and loyalty to a collective sense of belonging by Nigerians in online interaction. Drawing data from Nigeria's leading online community (www.nairaland.com) and insights from Group Attachment Theory (GAT), the study demonstrates how Nigerians in online interaction construct national pride and identity, linguistic uniqueness, and loyalty to their country of birth through the use of Naija.

Keywords: *Naija; identity construction; national identity; online forums; social media discourse*

INTRODUCTION

In the digitalised and increasingly globalising society of today, with all its numerous social dynamics and complexities, the struggles for negotiating identities have remained one of the most striking characteristics of human existence and intergroup relations. The concept of identity has become the tool through which most other aspects of contemporary human life are studied. Modern agitation and discussion about justice and equality often revolve around the debate for the recognition of the rights to a separate and unique identity by different groups. For instance, perceived social or cultural invasion by dominant groups in most societies usually lead to ethnic mobilisation among minority groups, and a sort of re-examination of their commitment and loyalty to national identity. In any society, there are

different groups and affiliations: family, schools, workplace, etc. As individuals, we are all members of several social groups at the same time, and we play quite different roles in these different groups at every point in time, constantly negotiating various forms of identities. Thus, using appropriate language to signal one's identity is essential in all of these contexts. In these different groups, people can show their unique identity through language use. Identity is so central to our existence, so much so that we strive to construct different forms of identities both at the personal and group levels. Personal identity is a definition and evaluation of oneself in terms of idiosyncratic personal attributes or one's relationships with other people or groups. Group identity is the collective awareness and an evaluation of oneself in terms of shared attributes that characterise membership of a specific group that people belong to (Hogg and Tindale, 2005).

The study of identity as an object of academic engagement has a long-standing history in many disciplines. However, in recent times, there has been an increased interest in the approach to the study of identity. And this is largely due to the growing awareness and consciousness about self-identity as a result of modernity (Giddens 1991). Identity comprises an abundance of different aspects as well as fields; it encompasses, for instance, "social identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, linguistic identity, socio-cultural identity, subjectivity, the self and the voice" (Miller 2004:150). According to Deckert and Vickers (2011:9), "Identity says something about who we are, and we perform identity by behaving in certain ways". Putting it differently, Schieffelin (1996:198), says it is "locally situated; who we are is partially a product of where we are and who we are with". As can be inferred from these scholars, identity is seen as context-bound and something people attempt to create, construct, or perform when interacting with others in their everyday encounters throughout their lives. The construction of identity is, therefore, a constant process that never ends throughout human life as long as people encounter and interact with people or groups. Through various media, and particularly through language, people, more than ever before, are trying to resist and challenge perceived control over their lives and cultures as a result of the influence of some dominant cultures or languages of the world, which has given rise to organised and institutional resistance from other languages and cultures around the

world. This quest for self and collective identity is reflected in language use as people thrive to construct, contest, and reconstruct themselves by challenging perceived negative notions of them by others.

Review of the Literature

Several scholars (Eriksen 1992; Hall 1998; Joseph 2004; Simpson 2007, 2008; David and Bechhofer 2015) have explored national identity in different contexts with varying outcomes. National identity is a multi-dimensional concept that involves a specific language, sentiment, and symbolism. Some of the features of national identity include an historic territory or homeland, common myths or historical memories, common legal rights or duties, and a common economy with territorial mobility for its members (Smith 1991). The feeling of national identity provides people with a powerful means of defining and locating themselves in the world through a collective whole and a distinctive culture. It is through this shared, unique culture (sometimes but not always a unique language) that people are enabled to know 'who they are'. When people discover that culture, they discover themselves.

This process of collective definition and location is in many ways the key to national identity. According to Hall (1998:181), "National or other collective identities as determined by fixed properties derived from common origins which define the distinctiveness, solidarity and inclusiveness shared by members. This is not to say that major differences do not exist between collectivities and do not inform the actions and beliefs of their members". Language is one of the crucial tools in the overall negotiation of the identity of a people. It is a double-edged sword capable of uniting people as well as differentiating them, and an integral part of people's cultures and identities. Another clear way of showing the connection between language and identity is the dilemma experienced by foreign nationals in different host nations with regard to what type of "self" to portray. Thus, the adoption of Naija by an educated Nigerian could be a deliberate attempt to signal the "Nigerianess" in him/her and display a form of national identity.

It has been observed that the concept of national identity may be viewed from both internal and external image projection and identification in any given context. National

identity, therefore, may have two different meanings. The first of the meanings would be a population's relationship and sense of belonging to a nation-state, while the second is the identity of an individual nation-state within the international world order (McLaughlin 2008). This means that national identity is a two-way thing, and that just as people within any nation-state strive to display their attachments to their countries through different ways, including language use, nation-states also, in their relationship with other nation-states on the global stage, and committees of nations also attempt to be seen in a particular way. Using these two dimensions of viewing national identity, Senegal can best be described as a predominantly Wolof-speaking nation, while on the international scene, it is a francophone state (McLaughlin 2008:79).

Thus, there may be differences in the kind of identity that ordinary individuals may make with other co-members of the population of a state and the external image that a nation-state seeks to achieve. The diffusion of cultures in the digital age is unequalled by any other period in human history, and consequently, what people hold in high esteem and cherish as important parts of their collective identities change and are likely to continue to change. This uncontrollable flow of cultures and people has made claims of collective identity blur, and thus, people have to consciously negotiate identities in the digital age.

The issue of identity negotiation, whether at the individual, organisational, or societal level, remains a core function of language. According to Warschauer (2002:5), "Through the choice of language and dialect, people constantly make and remake who they are. What the above assertion suggests is that it is through language that people construct and, if need be, contest identity or perceived misrepresentation. People's linguistic practices are replete with issues relating to constructing, contesting, and reconstructing identity in various contexts of human socialisation, especially in intergroup interactions. This has become even more complex and demanding with increased migration and contacts of distinct groups and cultures due to increased globalisation, leading to more consciousness about issues of group loyalty and national identity around the world. Talking about the place of language in the construction of identity, some scholars have argued that the centrality of language and dialect is due to the critical roles they play in the construction of different forms of identities.

Some of these scholars opine that the process of becoming a member of a community has always been realised in large measure by acquiring knowledge of the functions, social distribution, and interpretation of the language of the community (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984:127). The dynamic nature of language gives room for a lot of flexibility and the expression of multiple forms of identities at different points by language users. This fluidity makes it possible for people to construct multiple identities with the linguistic choices they make as dictated by the situation or context.

Identity is in many ways socially constructed, and this is why language, more than any other thing, plays a vital role in the construction of identities, their sustenance, and, when need be, their reconstruction. While some forms of identity, such as ethnicity and nationality, may be relatively stable, their construction is constantly negotiated by people. This position about the fluidity of identity, however, does not erase other positions and views about identity, but rather advocates that identity be perceived as a dialectic. In an attempt to conceptualise the connection between language and identity, Norton (1997:410) says, “every time people use oral language to address interlocutors, they are constantly organising and reorganising a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world”. Language, according to him, “is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication but has to be understood in relation to its social meaning” (Norton 2000:5).

Considering the conditions under which people use language and the functions it performs, it means people are constantly constructing and negotiating their identities. It is believed that through language, the individual is constituted as a subject. The connection between language and individual or collective identity is so strong that it is difficult to talk about one without talking about the other. Just as in the other aspirations of man, language is the greatest weapon available to man for the expression of his/her very core essence. Hence, language serves as a carrier of individual and collective identities and cultures. For instance, all the distinctive qualities in a particular culture, such as its values, customs, principles, faiths, ideologies, religions and philosophies, are embedded in the language of that culture. Indeed, language is an important aspect of the culture of a people because it carries their cultural, historical, social, and other forms of identities.

One of the reasons for this vintage position of language in the construction of different forms of identities is the fact that language serves as a means of marking “difference”, in a cultural sense. People from one group attempt to differentiate their own group from other groups. Thus, members of the group see themselves as “insiders” while others are perceived as “outsiders”. Using this distinction, people then see or categorise themselves using the ‘we’ and the “they” codes, which represent the in-group and the out-group. This is why some sociolinguists, such as Gumperz (1982) and Heller (1992), who have worked on language and social identity in their research, believe that identity is established and maintained through a group’s language or dialect. Gumperz (1982:66), using the heading conversational code-switching, also says that a group’s language is often seen as the in-group’s “we-code”, whereas the languages of other groups are perceived as the “out-group” languages and the “they code”. He also suggests that code-switching can signal various group memberships and identities. This is why Korth (2005:27) opines that ‘individuals may feel that they belong to a group because they feel that they share the same system of symbols and meanings and thus share an “us-feeling”’.

As a carrier of culture, language and its practices consequently become social manifestations of people's identity (Norton 2000). Language as social action embodies relations of power and identity embedded in people's interactions. Beyond personal identity at the individual level, people ultimately also organise themselves along other collective identities in society. Such collective identities include religious, ethnic, racial, linguistic, regional, and national. People, in trying to understand those things that make them what they are go beyond personal attributes and think of their cultural ties, language, beliefs, descent, etc. Collective identity, be it ethnic, national or any form of group identification, is one of the products of the socialisation processes in any society. They are important in any society because they give meaning to an individual’s collective existence on the one hand and their relationship with others within the society on the other hand. These socialisation practices are often taken as given by the people, so much so that they are sometimes seen as natural. As people grow up into adulthood in society, they learn to see themselves as members of different groups in religious circles, school, neighbourhood, language group, etc.

Through their involvement in important social and cultural activities, people take on, and exhibit certain social identities, and use their understandings of their social roles and relationships to others in interpreting their roles and the roles of others in their practices. These identities are not stable or held constant across contexts, but are rather emergent and context-specific.

This is why the quest for membership of collective identity, be it family, clan, ethnic, or national, represents an emotional attachment by which people seek inclusion not only for personal benefit, but because, as social beings, the consequences of isolation are something to be avoided. Thus, people voluntarily become members of these different groups. Again, there is often the fear of the consequences of being outside, disconnected, ostracised, and rejected by one's group, whether professional, religious, ethnic, or cultural group. Different groups can naturally expect a remarkable degree of compliance among members who value their inclusion in the groups due to the accruing psychological benefits from their membership in such groups. National identity represents one of such groups' associations and identification through which people realise their desires for involvement, affiliation, and inclusion in modern societies. More than just becoming members and belonging to these groups, people also want to meet their needs for personal survival, security, and safety through their participation and involvement in the activities of the groups. It could therefore be inferred that membership of these collective identifications comes with certain responsibilities that members have to fulfil to be part of the group. By early socialisation into the norms of the groups and discharging their obligations to these groups, people come to recognise their membership in various collectives and begin to draw distinctions between those within the group ("us") and those outside ("them").

RESEARCH METHODS

The data for this study are purposively selected posts obtained from Nigeria's leading virtual community – Nairaland. The forum is Nigeria's leading virtual forum for Nigerians both at home and abroad. The forum is all-purpose in terms of its thematic orientations, as opposed to some single-issue forums, which are specifically dedicated to a particular area/interest. Due to the general orientation of the forum, Nairaland features discussions on

jobs, business, romance, music, travel, autos, politics and governance, sports, culture, religion, language, issues of public interest, current affairs, etc. The forum serves as a major virtual meeting place where issues relating to Nigeria and Nigerians are discussed by participants, some of whom are based at home and many in different locations around the world. Discussants on this virtual forum have been observed to be mostly Nigerians, spouses of Nigerians, friends of Nigerians, other Africans from various parts of the continent, as well as people with interests in Nigeria and its culture (Heyd and Mair 2014:244). The data is a segment of a corpus consisting 11,718 members, 244,048 posts, and 17.3 million tokens retrieved and stored between 2005 and 2008 by the University of Freiburg, Germany, in a project on Cyber Creole in three post-colonial contexts. It is from this corpus that posts from different threads were purposively selected for the study. The rationale behind the choice of Nairaland as the data source is the specific focus of the forum on Nigeria and Nigerians and the researcher's access to a corpus of data from this forum. The *Nairaland* forum, from where the data is drawn, is an online social media community created by Seun Osewa in March 2005. It targets Nigerians at home and in the diaspora for the discussion of a wide range of issues concerning Nigeria and Nigerians. *Nairaland* currently has over 3,300,000 registered members (at March, 2026), and is ranked the 7th most visited site in Nigeria and the most visited indigenous site. The forum is regarded as the number one website in Africa in terms of traffic (Alexa.com). To achieve a systematic presentation of the data in the discussion of the findings of this study, the data were coded in letters and numbered accordingly using NRL to denote Nairaland.

Theoretical Orientation

Even though, according to Tartakovsky (2018), no theory that is exclusively dedicated to national identity currently exists, two general psychological theories are most commonly used to study national identity - social identity theory and the theory of group attachment. In this study, we have adopted Group Attachment Theory (henceforth GAT), in the analysis of the data and presentation of the findings. Rooted in the work of Bowlby's attachment theory, GAT extends the attachment theory and applies its principles to the relationships individuals form within various social groups, such as teams, organisations, communities, or nations. GAT examines how people form emotional and psychological bonds with different

groups to which they belong. It bridges individual psychological needs and social relationships within group settings, offering insights into how and why people bond with and depend on groups for their emotional and social well-being. In essence, GAT highlights the importance of emotional bonds within groups and their impacts on both group functioning and individual well-being, mirroring the attachment dynamics we see in personal relationships. As a theory used in explaining human behavioural practices, GAT offers valuable insights into people's understanding group loyalty and identity construction, as it highlights the emotional bonds individuals form with groups and how these bonds influence people's behaviour, commitment, and long-term attachment to their groups.

Applying GAT in studying and explicating group loyalty helps to explain why people feel connected, loyal, and identify with certain groups, and what strengthens or weakens that loyalty. GAT provides a valuable lens for understanding group loyalty, as it calls attention to the role of emotional connections, attachment strategies, and group dynamics in shaping how individuals commit to, and remain loyal to a group. By understanding the attachment processes that influence members' identity and loyalty, groups can foster stronger, more resilient ties, leading to more committed, supportive, and cohesive relationships within diverse social groups.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, we present the data analysis and discussion of the findings from the study. As previously mentioned, the analysis and discussion of the findings are guided by GAT, and it explores how Nigerians negotiate national identity and loyalty to the country of their birth through the use of Naija.

Naija as the Language of Unity and Inclusion

Nigerians, irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliation, display national loyalty, consciousness, and identity through the use of Naija on this virtual community. Naija appears to be the most prominent language used by Nigerians to communicate their attachment to their country in online interactions. It is the de facto national language used by Nigerians to display their collective bond to their country. Let us consider the posts in Excerpt 1 below.

The posts contain discussants' reactions to threads on two closely related language issues, "Nigeria's Disappearing Languages" and "Terrible State of the English Language in Nigeria".

Excerpt 1

NRL 1 - Re: Nigeria's Disappearing Languages by iHustle(m):

I love languages. I won't like to see any of our languages die. Fellow Nigerians, let us hail our creativity. We invented the 'broken English' which is widely use in Nigeria and beyond. We invented this beautiful language in less than 54 years. I think that's a record. Some of you won't value 'broken' as a language until you go abroad and meet other Nigerians. In my opinion, it should be made our second official language.

NRL 2 - Re: Nigeria's Disappearing Languages by Adamu_Emanuel(m)

English is not our language. No matter how hard we pretend, it won't work for us as a people. Let us look inward; it is better to adopt and develop Nigerian Pidgin as our national language in order to unite our people. Nigeria is a complex nation with so many sensibilities, and it is this type of deliberate move that can help to overcome the tensions in the country. For me, it is Nigerian Pidgin all the way.

NRL 3 - Re: Terrible State Of The English Language In Nigeria by naijaking1:

The importance of a standard grammatically correct English cannot be overemphasized in formal settings, but the role of pidgin as naija *quasi lingua franca* also deserves a special mention. Thank God for pidgin; a Yoruba can talk to Igbo, to Hausa, Tiv, Ijaw, Fulani, Igbira, Ibibio, and vice versa. Until we evolve a national language, I beg make una leave pidgin alone-o-o-o.

NRL 4 - Re: Terrible State Of The English Language In Nigeria by Temmie10(f):

@naijaking1:

The importance of a standard grammatically correct English cannot be overemphasized in formal settings, but the role of pidgin as naija *quasi lingua franca* also deserves a special mention.

Thank God for pidgin; the Yoruba can talk to Igbo, to Hausa, Tiv, Ijaw, Fulani, Igbira, Ibibio, and vice versa. Until we evolve a national language, I beg make una leave pidgin alone-o-o-o. seconded, every country has its own slangs, "shay? Abi? Leave me jare! O sha mo? As in you know sha?", are not exactly derogatory.

NRL 5 - Re: Terrible State Of The English Language In Nigeria by jerodawiz(m):

@blakky: hey, i want to believe that all the countries have their own pidgin language, e.g. Newcastle speak doges. please let celebrate pi-gin because is our own and everybody loves it. So dey speak am dey go. Na So. I LOVE NAIJA.

As evident in the posts of the discussants in NRL1 to NRL5 above, Naija (Nigerian Pidgin) is the language of choice among a lot of Nigerians in the communication of national consciousness and pride. The discussants in NRL1 and NRL2 talk about the central place of

Naija since its emergence in unifying the different ethnic groups within the country, and recommend its adoption and further development as the official language because of the different functions the language performs among Nigerians in diverse domains of language use. In NRL1, the discussant points out that beyond unifying Nigerians from different ethnic groups at home, Naija also becomes the language of interethnic interaction and communication when Nigerians meet abroad. It is also the preferred language of Nigerians on topics involving discussants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, when people wish to convey solidarity messages to other Nigerians or Africans, as the case may be, in different contexts, Naija becomes the number one choice. This is why the discussant in NRL3 above says the language that appears to be the rallying point for all Nigerians, irrespective of their ethnic, regional, or religious background, is Naija.

According to this discussant, just like some Nigerians also posit, until Nigeria evolves a national language, Naija should continue to play the role of Nigeria's national language, since it is the language most suitable to unite people from the different ethnic groups around the country. This becomes a suggestion to reflect upon in the context of the Nigerian situation, where there is no language that has the kind of national spread, numerical strength, and acceptability that Naija enjoys among the different ethnic groups and regions in the country.

What is evident in the above posts from these different discussants is a widespread recognition of the unifying role of Naija in Nigeria's national life. Nigerians are aware of the fear of domination, mutual suspicion, and unending rivalry among the different ethnic groups in the country on issues relating to the recognition and use of any of the indigenous or the three so-called "major languages" as a national language. Thus, even though Naija has not been given any official recognition in Nigeria, a lot of Nigerians see the language as one that is capable of reflecting the true national identity of the citizenry. The reason for these feelings among many Nigerians is not far-fetched. For instance, most educated Nigerians' language proficiency profile is usually English, their native language/mother tongue, and with different levels of proficiency in Naija. Even though it is now not uncommon to see Nigerians who cannot speak their native language, it is very rare to see a Nigerian without a passable proficiency in Naija, especially due to the freedom it allows speakers of the language

to mix linguistic items from multiple languages. This freedom that the speakers of Naija enjoy is one of the endearing factors of the language to many Nigerians across diverse social categories. Irrespective of their level of formal education, many Nigerians in the different regions of the country can speak and have some knowledge of Naija. It then follows that since there are many Nigerians who cannot speak their native language or mother tongue, and some, who due to lack of formal education, cannot speak English, Naija remains the language with the greatest regional and numerical strength in Nigeria, and hence, the most qualified as the national language and the language for constructing national identity.

Preference for Naija as Nigeria's National Language

In a particular thread, forum discussants specifically responded to the question of whether Naija should be adopted as Nigeria's national language. A total of sixty-six discussants responded to the thread "*Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as our National Language?*" The responses of the discussants confirmed the claim of popularity and preference earlier made by discussants on other threads about Naija in the construction of national identity. The posts in Excerpt 4 below are some of the comments of the discussants on the question.

Excerpt 2

NRL 6 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by 9ja4eva(f):

Na true jare. The Queens English never profit us sef. Abeg na pidgin all d way jare.

NRL 7 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by Digiman(m):

@ov: as a waffi guy make i yarn my mind. pidgeon na the way forward o. scrap queens english. pidgeon was made for us black human beings,. afterall even though hawk and owl de fly for sky na only one de see for night. If they do make it official please drop phrases such as "apes obey" its degrading !!!!

NRL 8 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by omoovie(f):

Oh and by the way, our neighbours are clamouring to speak our Nigerian version of Pidgin English because they think it's really cool. Naija films dey reach all over Africa sotay my friend from Morocco dey yan me of "Games Women Play" b4 me fa wey be Naija babe bin see am. All those people in all those countries see our language as cool and acceptable. Why don't we?! Ghana speaks pidgin, quite a few Cameroonians do too and what exactly do you think Sierra Leone's "krio" is? Nigeriens! Mon Dieu! C'etait ridicule! Incroyable! So Fela and Femi and Asa shouldn't have spoken pidgin?! Na wa oh!

NRL 9 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by OsunAmazon:

I support the adoption of pidgin english 100%, after all that's the only language spoken and understood by about 70% of Nigerians. What else do we need?

NRL 10 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by [edogram1\(f\)](#):

pidgin is so sweet, the Edos & delta speak it best.

NRL 11 - Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language? by [vikiviko\(m\)](#):

Pidgin, I subscribe should be adopted. Even abroad when you meet a fellow Nigerian these expressions are commonly used, My guy wetin dey, who you be, where you from, no wahala, nuthin much, i go call you, come chop, i dey work, i dey be student etc Its a language we all understand from ibo, yoruba, ijaw, efik, delta, edo, uhrobo , perhaps hausas too. the language is very sweet and original.

In Excerpt 2 above, the discussants use Naija in their posts or a blend of the language with English in order to show that the topic under discussion is an issue that affects all and that such issues relating to the adoption of a national language are seen as those with national relevance, and as such should be addressed with a language that cut across all the different social groups in the country. Unlike the use of English, many discussants see the use of Naija as peculiarly Nigerian. Thus, discussants are therefore motivated to come together and use this distinct way of speaking around a common topic. Unlike what the outcome of the use of their ethnic language generates, discussants also use Naija to display a collective national bond on the forum. This finding aligns with Akande (2010), who reports a similar result with regard to the use of NPE in expressing national affinity by Nigerians. One overall conclusion that can be derived from the use of Naija on the forum is the display of resistance identity by some Nigerians. As reflected in their posts, some of the discussants believe that Naija carries some national traits that other languages do not possess. There appears to be a kind of symbolic value attached to Naija by discussants in almost all types of discourse on the forum. This can be seen as a way of challenging the status of English as the official language and its dominance in almost all areas of Nigeria's national life.

To challenge this, and express collective national identity, many discussants use Naija in their posts. This kind of identity construction is crucial for the formation of patriotic thinking and the use of national languages by citizens. A total of sixty-six discussants responded to the thread "*Re: Nigerian Pidgin English as Our National Language?*". The responses of the discussants confirmed the popularity claim made earlier above about Naija

in the construction of national identity. The majority of the discussants supported the adoption of Naija as Nigeria's national language. Many of the discussants even argue that Naija is already playing this role, even though no recognition or constitutional pronouncement has assigned the role to the language. Many of the discussants opted for language and gave different reasons for their support for Naija as a national language. The chart below presents the responses of the discussants on the question of whether or not Naija should be adopted as Nigeria's national language at a glance.

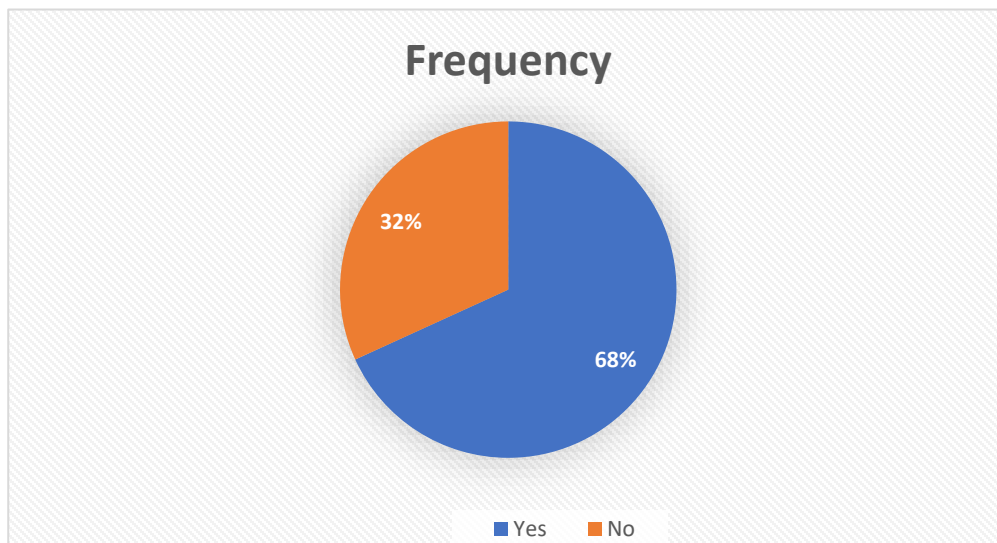


Figure 1: *Discussants' Responses to the Question on the Adoption of Naija as the National Language*

From the chart, it can be seen that out of 66 discussants, 45(68%) agreed that Naija should be Nigeria's national language, while 21(32%) did not support the idea. Hence, based on the discussants' responses, it can be concluded that Naija enjoys positive attitudes among Nigerians on the forum. This suggests that a lot of Nigerians actually want Naija as the national language of the country, mainly because of its national outlook, inclusive posture, and potential to herald national cohesion among the diverse ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria.

The support for Naija by the majority of the discussants as Nigeria's National language also confirms the submission of Faraclas (2021), who affirmed that NPE doubles as the most widely spoken language in Nigeria and the indigenous African language with the largest

number of speakers. All other languages in Nigeria are limited one way or the other in terms of the number of speakers across regions. Hence, while other languages in Nigeria are somehow dominant in certain regions of the country, NPE has a national spread among the people in these different regions and is popular among people with varying levels of education due to its simplified structures and relaxed rules of usage. Such a language cannot but be widely accepted and preferred by the generality of the people, with or without official pronouncement from the government as a way of assigning roles to it.

Naija as an Emerging National Resource

There is a renewed and growing interest in the use of Naija among Nigerians. The use of Naija has become one important way of negotiating what could be described as national identity by Nigerians in online interaction. Through its use, discussants are able to create a unique bond among Nigerians from different ethnic backgrounds and social statuses. It is now not uncommon to see discussants willingly suppressing their ethnic identity at some point as a way of deliberately foregrounding that collective national identity in intergroup interactions. Below are examples of the use of Naija by discussants in different threads and topics on the Nairaland virtual community.

Excerpt 3

NRL 12 - **Re: Terrible state of English Language in Nigeria by na2day2(f)**:

abeg, make u leave stori jo, make u come usa kon hear how dem dey father english, especially in the south, persin go dey give u direction, hin go say wen u reach the intersection I-35 & preston, hang left (instead of turn left). now, that one na English? by the time u listen to dem for dis side u go fear fear now. make una leave our own version of English jare, we dey we own ooo.

NRL 13 - **Re: Terrible state of English Language in Nigeria by JustGood (m)**:

wetin una dey talk sef? many oyinbo for Britain sef no sabi proper English grammar abi where una dey live sef. when oyinbo man and woman tell you say 'you should of gone out', you go sabi say dem no sabi grammar. abi make you come to Scotland. Everybody for Scotland go tell you say 'I have went and told them'. una too complain about anything 9ja people do. if oyinbo do the same, na 'new style'.

NRL 14 - **Re: Terrible State Of The English Language In Nigeria by gilgee(m)**: In as much as ENGLISH lang is recognised as a global lang, **e no sweet reach our pidgin English. If u sabi speak pidgin english well ehen, u no go even like oyinbo lang sef.** Maybe when u don tire to dey knack phonetic gbese, u go resort to pidgin to ease off the twisting of tongue nd mouth. Generally, pidgin english is cool nd many other countries have their own pidgin lang, i never

hear dem dey talk abt annihilating such languages. **Abeg make we dey value d things wey God give us, we go emulate white people die?**

The three posts above (NRL 12, NRL 13 & NRL 14) in Excerpt 4 are examples of the use of Naija for national identity construction by discussants, who are apparently educated and can use English competently. Two of these discussants, according to the contents of their posts and the geolocation information on Nairaland, both reside in the United States of America and Scotland, respectively. One would expect that they should be able to use English in making their contributions to the discussion on the forum. However, they both decided not only to use Naija to signal national loyalty or identity but also strongly argued in support of the use of the language in spite of its imperfections. In their posts, the discussants demonstrated that they are proud Nigerians who are not in the country but who are obviously interested in issues affecting the country. They commented on the terrible state of the English language in Nigeria, which, in their own assessments, is far better than what some English speakers do in the United States of America and Scotland, where they live. Rather than use English, they both use Naija to post their comments on the topic, citing their experiences about the situation where they live and providing examples of what speakers of English do in their places of residence.

These discussants did not have any full sentences in Standard English in their posts. Using different expressions, the discussants also display a very strong attachment to Nigeria and Naija as well as what people do as Nigerians in terms of the use of English, even though they are abroad. The expressions “*make una leave our own version of English jare, we dey we own ooo*” and “*una too complain about anything 9ja people do. if oyinbo do the same, na 'new style'*” suggest that their use of Naija is a conscious attempt to communicate their competence in Naija and display national pride and solidarity even though they are abroad. Hence, when it comes to the communication of oneness and unity of purpose among Nigerians, especially in intergroup interaction, Naija becomes the “national language” even though the language has no any official label or assignment of roles to it for performing this national function.

Except with a few exceptions like Tanzania and Uganda, Nigeria, like many other postcolonial African countries did not adopt a clear national language from the numerous

indigenous languages in the country, mainly due to the ethnolinguistic complexities and tensions in most postcolonial contexts. In the case of Nigeria, for instance, it is difficult to adopt any indigenous language as the national language because of the contentious nature of the issue of language choice in national discourse. Thus, in talking about the relationship between language and national development, Nigerians often use Naija as the language of unity. This is why Simpson (2008) in his introduction to a comprehensive treatment of the issue of language and identity in African nations says except for a few exceptions, most African nations have not witnessed the kind of language nationalism that strikingly characterised the growth of various nations in Europe and America, where a single language has been observed to be the soul of the nation and the language for national identity. Also from the same forum, Excerpt 4 below gives further examples of the use of Naija by discussants.

Excerpt 4

NRL 15 - Re: Jonathan To Launch N100 Centenary Note by wakacome(m):

Abu, you don dey old ooo...when you go finally get at least a small sense?? Na joke oo...long time bro...say me hi to "Martha".

NRL 16 - Re: Jonathan To Launch N100 Centenary Note by Pizzanatty(m):

Boko Haram Or No Boko Haram, Nigeria Is 100, and We Must Celebrate... Person dey sick, no mean say, his or date of birth will be put on hold. GEJ AND CBN SHARPERLY LAUNCH AM ABEG...

NRL 17 - Re: Jonathan To Launch N100 Centenary Note by jojomario(m):

Oga, how much was given to you? Abi na your company design the note ni. It really shows you are sick.

In Excerpt 4 above, we have instances of the deployment of the Naija by discussants in their posts on the debate about the introduction of a ₦100 Centenary note in Nigeria to commemorate the nation's 100th anniversary celebration at a time by the government. The story that generated these posts was on a thread reacting to a news report titled "Jonathan to Launch N100 Centenary Note". This led to a lot of debates among Nigerians on the appropriateness of the idea. The story about the planned introduction of the note was published entirely in the English language, and no reference was made in any part of the story to any of the indigenous languages or Naija. Yet, many of the discussants switched to

the use of Naija in their posts in their debates about the wisdom or lack of it on the initiative. It is important to note that even when some of the switches are only momentarily, they are nonetheless significant for the communication of identities in inter-group interactions. For instance, although it is stated on the forum that the official language of the forum is English, the discussants in the posts in Excerpt 4 above used Naija to signal national identity and pride in their interactions with other discussants.

One thing that can be deduced from the discussants' use of Naija in their posts above is the quest to signal that the subject of discussion is a matter that is entirely Nigerian or has to do with the country or its people, hence discussing such an issue in any other language other than a language that all Nigerians can relate to would be a disservice. It is a way of signaling the in-group versus out-group dichotomy that people usually evoke when they want to mark group identity in intergroup interaction. The choice of Naija by discussants on the forum as opposed to the use of English or any other Nigerian language appears to be a deliberate attempt to promote diversity and inclusion, thereby suppressing the usual ethnic rivalry and tension that accompany interactions involving Nigerians from the different, distinct groups in the country.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have demonstrated how Nigerians deploy Naija to construct national identity and loyalty on a virtual community. Through the adoption of the language, as against all other choices, including the use of English, the official language of the country and that of the forum, Nigerians have shown that far from being fixed, identity is negotiated using diverse tools, including the choice of a language or code. The study focuses on the different ways discussants deployed the language to negotiate difference, signal belonging, as well as display national pride in their country and what they perceive as the language capable of showcasing their "Nigerianness". The findings show that even though Nigerians are divided along ethnic lines due to their sociopolitical and historical nuances, a collective national identity is negotiated through emblematic switching and deliberate use of Naija for the creation of national identity among Nigerians on the forum, irrespective of the location of the discussants.

REFERENCES

- Akande, A. T. (2010). Codeswitching and identity. In I. Udofot & J. Udoudom (Eds.), *English usage in Nigeria since 1842: Patterns and changes: A festschrift for Prof. David Eka* (pp. 218-233). Devconsort Services in Collaboration with the University of Uyo Press.
- McCrone, D., & Bechhofer, F. (2015). *Understanding national identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Deckert, S. K., & Vickers, C. H. (2011). *An introduction to sociolinguistics: Society and identity*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Eriksen, T. H. (1992). *Us and them in modern societies*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Faraclas, N. (2021). Naija: A language of the future. In A. T. Akande & O. Salami (Eds.), *Current trends in Nigerian Pidgin English: A sociolinguistic perspective*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Language and social identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, J. A. (1998). *The state of the nation: Ernest Gellner and the theory of nationalism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Harwood, J. (2006). Social identity. In G. Shepherd, J. John, & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as... Perspectives on theory*. Sage Publication.
- Heller, M. (1992). The politics of codeswitching and language choice. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 13, 123-142.
- Heyd, T., & Mair, C. (2014). From vernacular to digital ethnolinguistic repertoire: The case of Nigerian Pidgin. In J. Lacoste & T. B. Leimgruber (Eds.), *Indexing authenticity* (pp. 244-268). De Gruyter.
- Hogg, M., & Tindale, R. S. (2005). Social identity, influence, and communication in small groups. In J. Harwood & H. Giles (Eds.), *Intergroup communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 141-164). Peter Lang.
- Joseph, J. E. (2004). *Language and identity: National, ethnic, religious*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Korth, B. (2005). *Language attitudes towards Kyrgyz and Russian: Discourse, education and policy in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.

- McLaughlin, F. (2008). Senegal: The emergence of a national lingua franca. In A. Simpson (Ed.), *Language and national identity in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Miller, J. (2004). Identity and language use: The politics of speaking ESL in schools. In A. Pavlenko & A. Blackledge (Eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts* (pp. 290-315). Multilingual Matters.
- Norton, B. (Ed.). (1997). Language and identity [Special issue]. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3).
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Pearson Education/Longman.
- Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1984). Language acquisition and socialization: Three developmental stories. In R. A. Shweder & R. A. LeVine (Eds.), *Culture theory: Essays on mind, self, and emotion* (pp. 276-320). Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1991). *National identity*. Penguin Books Limited.
- Simpson, A. (Ed.). (2007). *Language and national identity in Asia*. Oxford University Press.
- Simpson, A. (Ed.). (2008). *Language and national identity in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1996). Narrative as self-portrait: Sociolinguistic construction of identity. *Language in Society*, 25, 167-203.
- Tartakovsky, E. (2018). National identity. In R. J. R. Levesque (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of adolescence*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33228-4_367
- Warschauer, M. (2002). *Electronic literacies: Language, culture, and power in online education*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.