As Naija pipo dey tok: 
a preliminary analysis of the role of Nigerian Pidgin 
in the Nigerian community in Sweden

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Abstract
This paper presents an overview of the linguistic behavior in the Nigerian community in Sweden. It explores the linguistic behaviour of Nigerian immigrants in various domains as well as present preliminary insight into some of their language attitudes. Specifically this paper elucidates the central role played by Nigerian Pidgin within the Nigerian immigrant community. The study presented in this paper is based partly on a pilot questionnaire study carried out in Stockholm in 1996 by the author, the complete result of which is not included in the present paper, and participant observations over time (1996–2004) in Stockholm and Göteborg.

1. Introduction
So far very little study has been done on the Nigerian community in Sweden (see Onyeche 1996). Among researches that have been conducted on African communities in Sweden more attention has been given to the Somali community.¹ This is perhaps due to their being, statistically, the dominant African community in Sweden. However, this lopsided attention has resulted in poor understanding of other African communities with smaller populations. Linguistically, anyone observing the interactions in the Nigerian community in Sweden for the first time will find the language attitude and choices within this community very interesting. This linguistic behavior finds its origin in Nigeria.

¹ See on-going researches at Rinkeby Institute of Multilingual Research, Stockholm.
1.1 The Nigerian factor

Nigeria has numerous ethnic languages which have been estimated at about 515 (SIL 2004). However, it is a known fact that the estimated figure (515) is stingy. According to Adegbija (1994), Nigeria has many languages but problems such as “poor communication systems, insufficient funds for individuals and bodies interested in such surveys, lack of governmental impetus, and large expanses of people groups needing to be surveyed” are some of the “factors militating against the successful language survey in Nigeria” (idem:141). He cited an example from his current survey of Plateau State, a land area of 58,030 square kilometers and a population of about 3 million, which he claims has 62 languages in it. This same pattern could be seen in most of the thirty-six states. However, he acknowledges that it could be argued that some of these languages are dialects but there remains the problem of which language is a language and which is a dialect. Elugbe (1990) agrees with the above argument. He claims that the number of Nigerian languages could be higher than presently estimated if intelligibility and other practical indices for delimiting language boundaries are considered.

The linguistic situation in Nigeria is so complex that one would think that communication would be impossible in an inter-tribal interaction without the English language, but it is noticeable that this complex situation has been bridged by a kind of pidgin or lingua franca. North and South geographical division of Nigeria has to be taken into consideration in discussing the language situation and behavior of Nigerians. In the northern Nigeria, where the population is predominantly Muslim, there are numerous languages such as Hausa, Tiv (spoken in the plateau), Kanuri, Koi and others. Hausa is the language of wider communication or lingua franca (although Nigeria Pidgin is also used alongside Hausa in urban areas) in that part of the country, and Arabic is the religious language. In the southern part of Nigeria there are many languages but Yoruba and Ibo have the largest number of speakers. Because of the complex linguistic situation, and since not everyone is literate enough to speak English, the official language, Nigerian Pidgin is used as the lingua franca. Nigerian Pidgin has been estimated to have been used in the southern Nigeria since the fifteenth century when trading contact developed between Europeans and coastal Africans. According to Jowitt (1991:13), when the Europeans developed additional concerns in the areas of religion and politics and penetrated the interior of Nigeria, it was natural for a pidgin variety to serve as an important means of communication since a large percentage of the population were still uneducated in English.

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2 This may also be referred to as ‘traditional domestic languages’.
English is the language used in official domains such as (western formal) education as well as in offices. It is used along with Nigerian Pidgin and vernaculars in electronic and print media. Since a large percentage of Nigerians do not receive any formal western education, traditional education (that is, learning of traditional skills such as farming, carving, music, building, etc.) and modern apprenticeships (such as auto-mechanic, modern house building, electronic repairs, etc.) are considered very important in understanding the Nigerian language situation. According to Brann (1975), a distinction has to be made whether the apprenticeship takes place at home or outside of it in order to understand the influences they have on language use and attitudes among Nigerian children. In a situation where a son works with his father in the farm or workshop, he is likely to hear and use the local vernacular. A girl who goes to the market stall with her mother is likely to hear and speak the local vernacular if in a rural area, or both Nigerian Pidgin and the local vernacular if in sub-urban or urban areas. This also applies to boys and girls who are sent to relatives to learn a trade. In northern Nigeria this includes Quranic schools where the children are taught in Arabic by the mallam (or mullah), in whose house they live while also learning his calling (farming, etc.). Outside the house these children come into contact with English and Nigerian Pidgin if in urban areas or, if in rural areas, remain limited to the official language.

Formal education also plays an important role for language use and attitudes among Nigerians. In urban primary schools, English is used as the language of instruction, but outside classrooms or during breaks (in public schools) children often use Nigerian Pidgin or English (in some upper/middle class private schools) when they play. At home, they use their native vernaculars, Nigerian Pidgin, or English with their parents. In rural schools, English and local vernaculars are used for instruction. Pupils use the local vernacular during breaks since most children in rural schools share the same ethno-linguistic background (Gani-Ikilama 1990; Onyeche 1995). They also use vernaculars at home. However, for secondary school pupils, boarding houses have strong influence on the language behavior of students, which is carried on into adult life. In boarding schools, away from home, students use Nigerian Pidgin more frequently among their peers outside classes and school hours. The case is different for those who are day students (that is, students who attend a secondary school from home).

Today in urban Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin is the language of social interaction and it is sometimes used for explaining difficult points in schools. It

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3 This depends on the ethno-linguistic structure of the family; for instance, if the parents share the same ethnic language or not.
is also a grassroots language which government establishments use for campaigns and public information services. In many urban markets, Nigerian Pidgin is often used for price negotiations along with the dominating ethnic language. In Lagos state, for example, since Yoruba is the dominating language, it is often the case that Nigerian Pidgin is used in the market alongside Yoruba.

Many post-independence writers such as Ken Saro-wiwa, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, and others have made their mark in Nigerian Pidgin literature. Nigerian Pidgin entertainment magazines are being published and some of the most popular music in Nigeria are in Nigerian Pidgin. Presently, the growing home video culture in Nigeria has also contributed to the consolidation of Nigerian Pidgin as a lingua franca.

### 1.2 The Nigerian Community in Sweden

The Nigerian community in Sweden is a small one compared to many other immigrant communities. There were 757 Nigerians in Sweden in 2001 (SCB 2004). Although Nigerians are spread all over Sweden, the majority of them reside in Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö.

Migration of Nigerians into Sweden began in 1967 during the Nigerian civil war. Another influx occurred from 1976 to 1980 with Nigerians who came for studies. Some of these Nigerians got married to Swedes and settled down in Sweden, while some returned to Nigeria with their families in the late seventies and early eighties during the Nigerian oil-boom. This was a period when Nigeria was experiencing economic success. Late eighties and early nineties witnessed an in-flow of Nigerians into Sweden due to economic depression and mass unemployment in Nigeria, a consequence of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) adopted by the Nigerian government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
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<tr>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>757</td>
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Table 1. Total numbers of Nigerian-born immigrants in Sweden 1993 - 2001

Table 1 provides an official statistics of the Nigerians resident in Sweden until 2001. However, the exact population of Nigerians living in Sweden is not available since there are many Nigerians in Sweden who held other countries’ passports when they migrated to Sweden and are therefore officially regarded as citizens of those other countries; but within the Nigerian community these are no less Nigerian than others. Those who are seeking and have not been granted asylum in Sweden were not included in the statistics and these make up a large
percentage of young Nigerians in the community.

Nigerians in Sweden are largely in the second generation. As expected, the first generation of Nigerian immigrants appear to be very much attached to their ethnic languages, Nigerian Pidgin and English.

Although the first generation Nigerians have settled comfortably in Sweden, built their homes and raised their children, professionally many have tended to settle for employments in professions that require less pressures in terms of Swedish language skills. Although there is no official statistics available at this time, my own observations have shown that very few of them are found in Swedish civil service and high skilled professions. Part of the reason for this could be that some of those who gained their education in Sweden either returned to Nigerian or left Sweden for other countries where their skills could be used. Others who acquired their education in Nigeria before migrating to Sweden were unable to enter the Swedish civil service due to Swedish bureaucracy at the time. They were unable to pursue further education in Sweden which could have enabled them to work in that area. Some have also experienced difficulties in learning and acquiring the Swedish language.

2. Linguistic Behavior of Nigerians in Sweden

Members of the Nigerian community in Sweden can be grouped under three language groups: Yoruba, Ibo (or Igbo) and Edo. These are the three major groups that dominate the community. However, there are other ethnic groups like the Urhobo, Itsekiri and Ijaw but these are in the minority. From the aforementioned language groups it is obvious that the majority of Nigerians in Sweden are from the south of Nigeria. At a glance it could be observed that Yoruba speakers appear to be larger than any other group. This does not mean that ethnic Yorubas have a higher population. Many Nigerians with other ethnic affiliations and languages (like Igbo, Edo) speak Yoruba too, while ethnic Yoruba speakers are largely monolingual (Mgo-Elue 1989).

Within the Nigerian community in Sweden, Nigerian Pidgin is seen as a mark of being a Nigerian. A person speaking Nigerian Pidgin is automatically identified as a Nigerian. Many Nigerians interviewed have encountered situations, especially during their early years in Sweden, when they were yet to meet their fellow Nigerians, where in the bus or tram they hear an African talking on the phone in Nigerian Pidgin and thus quickly identify that person as a Nigerian. Among male Nigerians, the person heard speaking Nigerian Pidgin is approached and then usually greeted with the usual *O boy hau nau?* (meaning ‘O boy how are you?’) if they are in the same age group, or *Are you a Nigerian?* — and thus starts a bonding process. Such nationalistic attachment to language
have been studied by linguists and political scientists alike (see Jenkins 1997; Anderson 1991; Banks 1989). SanAntonio (1989) referred to language as a tool for the manipulation of identity on the individual level after observing that among Japanese there is a strong relationship between being Japanese and speaking Japanese.

Even among Swedes married to Nigerians or Swedes who have lived in Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin is upheld as a symbol of being a Nigerian. Although some of these Swedes have tried to learn the Nigerian languages of their spouses, they still try to speak Nigerian Pidgin through which they feel they can bond with Nigerians. However, seeing a European speaking a language they identify only with Nigerians can sometimes come as a shock to some Nigerians. for instance, Nigerian embassy officials have recounted several cases where Swedes have walked into the embassy, with the officials assuming they will be speaking English, but only to be speechless when these Swedes started speaking Nigerian Pidgin. The way Nigerians have come to perceive or regard Nigerian Pidgin as part of their national identity makes it unusual when a non-Nigerian is heard speaking it.

In cases of inter-ethnic interactions within the Nigerian community, English or Nigerian Pidgin is used depending on the degree of formality or informality involved. In a typical interaction, as could be observed in the Nigerian union monthly meetings, English language is the official language of communication, but Nigerian Pidgin as well as vernacular languages are used by individuals depending on the ethnicity of the individuals involved for informal discussions before and during the union meetings.

However, in the home domain there exists a multilingual situation. Most Nigerians living with partners who are Swedes use English and Swedish at home. In cases where they have children, these children are usually proficient in both languages. A 57 year-old Nigerian who has lived in Sweden for 31 years and who is married to a Swede explained that his family uses English language at home, since from the start he and his wife communicated in English. They agreed that English should be the language used in their home, although his wife and their daughters sometimes communicate in Swedish.

The case is different for Nigerians with Nigerian spouses. In situations where partners share the same ethnic language, the homes are usually bilingual. The spouses mainly use their ethnic language between themselves, while English and their ethnic language are used with their children. Furthermore it is expected that these children will learn and acquire Swedish at school as well as through interaction with their peers who in many cases are not from the Nigerian community.

For Nigerian couples with different ethno-linguistic backgrounds, the
linguistic situation at home is also bilingual. English and Nigerian Pidgin are used by the partners since they do not have the same native language and they relate to their children in English.

When Nigerians meet in social settings, they either communicate in a Nigerian language (if they are from the same ethnic group or one of them is bilingual in the others’ ethnic language), English, or Nigerian Pidgin, depending on the subject, their relationship, and the social orientation of the people involved. Normally when the speakers are strangers they tend to speak formally and thus English is used. If the speakers are friends, the situation is more informal and so Nigerian Pidgin is more often used for this purpose. On the other hand, when Nigerians are intentionally trying to create distances among themselves they keep the conversation in English. This phenomenon of distancing is referred to as “oppression” by Nigerians. This is a social behaviour or “art” during which the people involved try to out-do each other by making it obvious that they do not belong to the same social class. There are cases where some people intentionally turn down a friendship by replying in English to a question posed in Nigerian Pidgin. This in general is considered embarrassing by the person who initiated the interaction in Nigeria Pidgin. In this quest to establish or prove class superiority even those who are not competent in English due to their educational levels still struggle to express themselves in English, even if they have to wrestle, so to speak, with the language.

However, when male Nigerians in Sweden who are mutual friends get together in a social gathering they indulge themselves in yabbis.\(^4\) Yabbing, yabbis or teasing is an oral repertoire during which friends hurl serious jokes at each other, or lampoon each other; not as an act of enmity but as a mark of friendship. Yabbing is the peak of interaction in a social gathering of Nigerian men. During yabbis, if a participant switches to English the yabbis may be misconstrued for real hostility from the joke it is intended to be.

Like other immigrants, members of the Nigerian community have acquired the Swedish language and continue to do so in varying degrees, especially through the Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) language programme available at Swedish universities. They use it in official domains, such as work, shops, or in dealings with government ministries. They do not use Swedish among

\(^4\) Yabbis is basically carried out in Nigerian Pidgin or in a Nigerian (ethnic) language. Yabbis has become a genre in Nigerian oral literature and entertainment. Yabbis was promoted by the Afro-beat musician Fela Anikulapo Kuti who used it in his music as a political tool, by lampooning the Nigerian government, while entertaining at the same time. It has now been introduced to the internet by Nigerians, and it is significant that even on yabbis message boards, where Nigerians meet to trade yabbis, it can only be effectively done in Nigerian Pidgin even though Nigerian Pidgin has no standard orthography. Yabbis is not common among Nigerian women.
themselves except with their children, who are not competent in their Nigerian ethnic languages. They may also use Nigerian Pidgin instead of English. Swedish is also used when interacting with Swedes as well as other immigrants from non-English speaking countries. Even when they do business with fellow Nigerians, Nigerian Pidgin and English are mainly used when those involved do not share the same ethnic language. Swedish is hardly used.

3. Conclusion

Generally, it is the observed fact that Nigerian migrants in Sweden hold on tightly to Nigerian Pidgin as their identity in Sweden. Although one would expect that since these immigrants are trying to integrate into the Swedish society, they would be using Swedish in their interaction with their fellow Nigerians, especially in the presence of their children, many of whom are born in Sweden and do not speak Nigerian Pidgin.

In fact, it is not presumptuous to state that it is considered rude by many Nigerians for a fellow Nigerian to speak to them in Swedish, especially when, if they do not share the same ethnic language, it is clear that such a person is competent in English or Nigerian Pidgin.

Nigerian Pidgin plays a practical and emotional role in the lives of Nigerians. This is substantiated by a remark made by a 40 year old Nigerian in Göteborg. He remarked that after meeting fellow Nigerians and having talked Nigerian Pidgin with them, he feels like he has been given a vitamin shot; as he usually feels alive again after such encounters.

REFERENCES


