

**Beyond Mutual Intelligibility: A Sociolinguistic Study of Nigerian Pidgin English Usage
in Digital Communication**

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Abstract

This paper attempts a sociolinguistic analysis of Nigerian Pidgin English in digital communication, with particular attention to how its linguistic features function beyond the question of mutual intelligibility to show identity. The paper is anchored in William Labov's Variationist Sociolinguistics Theory and Richard Hudson's model of linguistic variables to explain Nigerian English as a meaningful variety of English in the context of its use. Fifteen (15) utterances produced in Nigerian Pidgin English were purposively selected under Verydarkman's Facebook post and presented as data for the paper. The findings revealed that lexical choices, grammatical structures, and stylistic shifts in Nigerian Pidgin English construction are meaningful structures that reflect shared cultural knowledge, communicative goals, and social identity. The analysis also revealed that expressions drawn from Nigerian Pidgin English and local languages help speakers signal identity within digital spaces. The study concludes that online communication provides a useful space for understanding how Nigerian Pidgin English, identity, and society are closely connected.

Keywords: Nigerian Pidgin English, Digital Communication, Sociolinguistics, Mutual Intelligibility, Identity

Introduction

Prolonged contact with over five hundred indigenous languages in Nigeria has resulted in the emergence of Nigerian Pidgin English, a distinct variety characterised by localised phonological, lexical and syntactic features (Jowitt, 2005, p.8). Nigerian Pidgin English reflects the linguistic forms of its speakers, who have indigenised the language to suit local communicative needs and sociocultural realities.

Much of the early scholarship on Nigerian Pidgin English focused on the concept of mutual intelligibility, often assessing the variety in terms of its comprehensibility to speakers of Standard British English. Of course, intelligibility remains an important consideration, but it is insufficient for explaining how language functions in contemporary digital contexts. Online users frequently employ non-standard spellings, abbreviations and localised expressions to express feelings. As Adegbija observes, the most significant development in the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin English lies not in its deviation from external standards but in its functional adaptation to communicative needs (Adegbija, 1994, p.11). This point is re-echoed by Uwen & Nta (2021) who opine that Nigerian Pidgin English is characterised by Local colour and the linguistic variations, when evaluated with sociolinguistic variables, clearly express the domestic adaptations and alterations in English language usage in the Nigerian environment.

Digital platforms provide fertile ground for examining these adaptations. Expressions such as “A no wan wahala”, “No dey talk like Agbero”, or “No kpai him abeg” are widely intelligible within Nigerian digital communities. At the same time, they index shared cultural knowledge and social identity. These forms illustrate that Nigerian Pidgin English in digital communication functions as a sociolinguistic resource for identity construction. Consequently, an exclusive focus on mutual intelligibility obscures the broader social meanings embedded in online language use. This study therefore examines Nigerian English

usage in digital communication beyond mutual intelligibility. By analysing how Nigerian Pidgin English is deployed in online interactions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of Nigerian Pidgin English as a dynamic, socially embedded variety of English.

The aim of this paper is to examine how Nigerian Pidgin English functions in digital communication beyond the level of mutual intelligibility, with particular attention to its role as a sociolinguistic resource for expressing identity, cultural knowledge, and social relationships in online Nigerian discourse. Specifically, the paper sets out to:

- i. identify the linguistic features of Nigerian Pidgin English used in digital communication;
- ii. examine how the linguistic features function as sociolinguistic variables;
- iii. investigate how Nigerian Pidgin English in digital spaces reflects shared cultural knowledge and identity.

Nigerian Pidgin English

Nigerian Pidgin English is said to have developed into one of the most widely used contact languages in Nigeria. It emerged as a result of the contacts between European traders and indigenous communities during the early colonial period. Nigerian Pidgin is a term used to denote an English based pidgin; a marginal language used to facilitate communication needs in certain interaction contexts. Simply put, Nigerian Pidgin is a contact language that emerged from the fusion of indigenous languages and foreign language (English). Elugbe and Omamor (1995) in their attempt to define pidgin see it as ‘some kind of a marginal language that arises to fulfill specific communication needs in well-defined circumstances’. Their definition suggests that Pidgin is not an official language, but a marginal language used for communication by people who do not speak a common language. Many other scholars have defined the term Nigerian Pidgin English. According to Faraclas (1996, p.1) “Nigerian Pidgin is an English-lexifier pidgin and creole spoken widely across Nigeria as a lingua franca

among people who do not share a common native language”. Faraclas emphasises that Nigerian Pidgin English bridges the communication gap between people of different linguistic background. Similarly, Igboanusi (2002) defines Nigerian Pidgin as “one of the most widely used languages of informal interaction in Nigeria and serves as a major means of communication across ethnic social boundaries.” Likewise, Ofulue (2017, p. 94) posits that “Nigerian Pidgin English has become a widely accepted medium of informal communication in Nigeria and increasingly serves as a marker of shared identity among speakers.” These definitions highlight the role of Nigerian Pidgin English as an important medium of communication in Nigeria’s multilingual society.

Linguistically, Nigerian Pidgin English exhibits distinctive features across multiple levels. Phonologically, it reflects patterns influenced by indigenous language systems, including vowel substitutions and tonal transfer (Jowitt, 2005, p.8). Morphologically and syntactically, features such as reduplication for emphasis (e.g. small-small), variable plural marking, and tense-aspect modification are common (Bamgbose, 2000, p.23). Kaan and Nwabudike (2025), in exploring sociolinguistic variation in the morphology of Nigerian English noted that while linguistic norms have to be preserved, it is significant not to ignore how social and linguistic factors shape new varieties of English. Lexically, Nigerian Pidgin English incorporates indigenous words, Nigerian Pidgin English expressions, and locally coined items such as wahala, gist, and omo (Adegbija, 1994, p.15).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Nigerian English Pidgin functions as a marker of identity and social belonging. It mediates communication across ethnic, regional, and educational divides, enabling speakers to negotiate social relationships and power dynamics. In digital contexts, these functions are amplified, as users draw on Nigerian English to show identity and be relevant with the communication context.

Digital Communication

Digital communication refers to interaction mediated through electronic platforms such as social media, instant messaging applications, and online forums. The rise of digital communication has transformed language use by introducing new norms of brevity, informality, and multimodality. Crystal (2003, p.29) observes that online discourse encourages spontaneity and creativity, allowing users to manipulate linguistic forms in ways that are uncommon in traditional written genres.

According to Olaniran (2000, p.45), in Nigeria, digital communication has expanded rapidly due to increased internet access and mobile phone usage. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become central to everyday interaction, providing spaces where language is both produced and negotiated in real time. Androutsopoulos (2014, p.78) points out that linguistic features commonly associated with digital communication include abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, non-standard orthography, and code-switching.

Herring (2013, p. 231) notes that Digital Communication is not linguistically neutral. It reflects social structures and cultural norms, with language choices shaped by factors such as age, gender, education, and region. This stance is corroborated by Eze (2019,p.55) who points out that in multilingual societies, digital platforms facilitate code-mixing and code-switching, allowing speakers to draw on multiple linguistic resources to achieve nuanced meaning. Nigerian English users frequently alternate between Standard English, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin English, and indigenous languages, demonstrating the flexible and adaptive nature of online discourse.

Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, focusing on how linguistic variation correlates with social factors and communicative contexts. Ronald Wardhaugh (2010, p.3) defines sociolinguistics as the study of language in its social context,

emphasizing that linguistic forms are shaped by social structures and cultural norms. Variationist sociolinguistics, pioneered by Labov (1974, p. 42) demonstrates that variation is systematic rather than random and is linked to variables such as age, gender, class, and region.

In Nigeria, sociolinguistic variation in English reflects the country's multilingual and multicultural composition. Speakers select linguistic forms strategically to signal identity, solidarity, or authority. Digital communication intensifies these processes by providing environments where language use is less regulated and more reflective of everyday interaction. As Tagliamonte and Derek (2008, p.5) note, online discourse offers a window into spontaneous language use and ongoing linguistic change.

Mutual Intelligibility

Mutual intelligibility has long been used as a criterion for evaluating language varieties, particularly within discussions of World Englishes. It refers to the extent to which speakers of different varieties can understand one another without difficulty (Trudgill, 1974, p.22). In early studies of Nigerian English, intelligibility to British or American English speakers was often treated as a benchmark for legitimacy (Banjo, 1979, p.67).

Subsequent scholarship has challenged this narrow focus. Adebija (1994, p.24) argues that intelligibility is socially negotiated and influenced by familiarity, context, and shared pragmatic norms. In digital communication, intelligibility alone fails to account for the social meanings conveyed through localised expressions, stylised spellings, and pragmatic markers. As Crystal (2003, p.78) observes, online discourse prioritises relational meaning and contextual relevance, often over strict adherence to standard norms.

Identity Construction in Digital Space

Identity construction is a central concern in sociolinguistic studies of digital communication. Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p.587) conceptualise identity as a dynamic and interactionally

constructed phenomenon, enacted through linguistic choices. Barton and Lee (2013,p.45) opine that online environments provide users with heightened opportunities for identity performance, as messages can be stylised, edited, and tailored to specific audiences. This explains why on social media, people now use language to reflect their linguistic and national identities from all corners of the world.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined language in digital communication from a sociolinguistic perspective. Memon, et.al. (2020) conducted a study on “Characterizing Sociolinguistic Variation in the Competing Vaccination Communities”. The study shows that linguistic features such as pronouns, intensifiers, and stance markers differ across ideological groups and it concluded that online language reflects community identity and social group identity. Blommaert (2010), in *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, examined how mobility and global communication, including online interaction, shape language practices and identity, showing that digital discourse often reflects shifting social positions rather than stable linguistic norms. Herring (2013) in a study on computer-mediated discourse provided empirical analyses of online interaction and demonstrated that linguistic patterns on the internet are structured by social variables such as gender, group membership, and communicative purpose. Studies by Lee (2015) on multilingual practices on internet similarly showed that users employ code-switching and stylistic variation deliberately to express identity and manage relationships in digital spaces. Generally, these works show that digital communication is socially patterned and that language choices online are meaningful indicators of identity.

However, these studies largely focus on global online communities, multilingual identity performance, or ideological groupings rather than on specific national varieties of English. They show that variation exists online but do not examine how a localised variety such as

Nigerian Pidgin English operates as a sociolinguistic system in its own right. Whereas, the present paper focuses on Nigerian Pidgin English in online discourse to see how online users use Nigerian Pidgin English to reflect identity and associate with the online community.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employed the variationist sociolinguistics theory of William Labov (1972) and is corroborated by Richard Hudson's (1996) model of linguistic variables. These approaches are suitable because they explain language variation as a meaningful social phenomenon rather than as incorrect usage.

Variationist sociolinguistics views language as naturally variable and shaped by social factors. Labov (1972, p. 3) explains that variation is a regular feature of language and reflects social structure and interaction rather than individual mistake. Thus, differences in language use are connected to social realities such as ethnic group, environment, and communicative situation. This idea is important for the present study because Nigerian Pidgin English in digital communication does more than conveying information; it also expresses identity. By examining recurring patterns in online interaction, the theory helps explain how these forms function as social markers in communication.

The study also adopts Hudson's (1996) sociolinguistic model, which focuses on how different varieties have distinct vocabularies and grammar. Hudson explains that sociolinguistic variables are those linguistic forms whose distribution requires social explanation rather than purely grammatical description (Hudson, 1996, p.150). This view makes it possible to analyse how lexical choices, expressions, and constructions in Nigerian English online reflect users' social identity and communicative purposes.

By combining these perspectives, the study treats Nigerian English in digital communication as a socially meaningful system. Labov's framework helps identify patterned variation, while

Hudson's model allows the study to examine variation across different linguistic levels. Together, these theoretical modes provide a suitable basis for explaining how Nigerian Pidgin English functions online not only for understanding but also for identity construction.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to enable an in-depth analysis of the text. The data were collected from Facebook because of its wide usage in Nigeria. Fifteen (15) utterances produced in Nigerian Pidgin English were purposively selected from the comments under Verydarkman's Facebook post, regarding Senator Ned Nwoko's viral video, where he is allegedly massaging a young beautiful lady in a private jet. The comments under Verydarkman's Facebook post were selected because Verydarkman and his fans always use Nigerian Pidgin English. The study employed Social Variationist Theory to see how digital platform users construct identity through Nigerian Pidgin English variety.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Nigerian Pidgin English	Standard English
You no dey enter pj were you for dey work?	You don't enter private jet; where are you supposed to be working?
Weyre, but you be the baba for curs3 nau	Mad man, but you are now the boss of the curse
Imakwa! Chop life. De Papas are chopping life – Dem say make youths no chop!	Amazing! Enjoy life. The old men are enjoying life, yet they tell the youths not to enjoy life.
Person dey enjoy e old age, the man don enter house he is no more a speaker	The man is enjoying his old age; he has stepped down and is no longer a speaker
Abeg we need platform for 2027 election...	Please, we need a platform for the 2027

Find one of those small registered political party... Make we show say we get level 4 this Naija.	election. Find one of those small registered political parties so we can show that we have influence in Nigeria
Tomorrow dem go kill b'cos of this their oga wey no mean well for dem, Nigeria youth wakeup	Tomorrow they may suffer because of their leader who does not mean well for them. Nigerian youths, wake up.
Make we start 2027 elections na make candidates lap	Let us begin preparing for the 2027 elections so that candidates can start campaigning
Make una dey watch video finish before una comment na	You people should watch the video to the end before commenting
Wahala wahala, Adams body go hear am this week	There will be trouble; Adams will face the consequences this week
Na so I be, my president	That is how it is, my president
Oga e de work. Go ask Soludo and Ozonna	Boss, it is working. Go and ask Soludo and Ozonna
E clear abi e no clear	Is it clear or not?
God no dey punish oh, that wish no dey work at all. Na action go change things oh	God does not punish like that; wishes alone do not work. Only action will change things
Omo, the biggest juju for this world na to get clean hand and clean mind	The greatest talisman or charm in this world is to have clean hands and a pure mind

This study examined Nigerian Pidgin English as it appears in digital communication, focusing on how language variation functions in online interaction. As such, the comments presented above demonstrate that language used in Nigerian digital spaces are socially

meaningful with its distinct vocabularies and grammar. This position justifies the ideas of William Labov, who argues that variation is a normal feature of language shaped by social interaction. It also reflects the position of Richard Hudson, who explains that some linguistic forms require social explanation rather than purely grammatical description.

First, the lexical items used in the comments are markers of cultural and national identity. Words such as *abeg*, *wahala*, *oga*, *juju*, *imakwa*, *were*, *papa*, *Omo*, *Naija*, *lap*, and *shege* are widely used and understood in everyday Nigerian English vocabularies. The use of language signals that the speakers belong to the Nigerian speech community and shares its cultural knowledge. For instance, words like *oga*, *Omo*, and *wahala* are from Yoruba. Also, the words "imakwa" and "juju" are from Igbo. When these expressions appear in online discussions, they create a sense of shared experience and familiarity among users. This means that the choice of vocabulary is not accidental; it is a deliberate way of showing social belonging and culture. Hudson's notion of linguistic variables helps explain this because these forms are selected for social meaning, not because the speakers lack knowledge of Standard English.

Second, the grammatical structures seen in the comments show consistent patterns typical of Nigerian Pidgin. Expressions like "e dey work," "person dey enjoy," and "na so he be" follow common grammatical structures system rather than random deviation from the norms. The use of "dey" as a progressive marker, "go" as the future tense, the omission of the copula, and the absence of tense marking are all regular features of the variety of Nigerian English. This is in line with Labov's opinion that language variation is sometimes systemic. The speakers are not producing incorrect sentences; they are using the grammar of a different but legitimate linguistic system that suits the informal digital context. Overall, the patterns found in the comments show that Nigerian English online are structured and meaningful system. The linguistic forms chosen by speakers reflect identity and interactional goals. From this

perspective, the variation seen in the data is not evidence of poor language ability but evidence of socially guided language use. The framework therefore helps explain that Nigerian English in digital spaces serves both communicative and social functions: it allows users to exchange ideas while also constructing identity and relationships within the online community.

By analysing selected comments, the work showed that the forms used by speakers are not random or incorrect but patterned and meaningful. The study demonstrated that lexical choices, grammatical structures, and stylistic shifts in Nigerian English reflect shared cultural knowledge, communicative goals, and social identity. The analysis revealed that expressions drawn from Nigerian Pidgin English and local languages help speakers signal belonging, express stance, and create solidarity within digital spaces. In this way, Nigerian English online serves both informational and interactional purposes.

Also, the work showed that language variation in Nigerian digital discourse is systematic, socially conditioned, and functionally motivated. Overall, the research featured Nigerian Pidgin English as a structured sociolinguistic system shaped by context, identity, and interaction, demonstrating that digital communication provides an important space for observing how language variation functions in contemporary Nigerian society.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Nigerian Pidgin English is used in online communication. It analysed selected comments, showing that the language people use on the internet is not wrong or careless but meaningful and purposeful. The work showed that Nigerian Pidgin English words, local expressions, and informal structures help speakers express their identity, share cultural knowledge, and connect with others in discussion. The analysis also showed

that these forms follow regular patterns and are used deliberately depending on the situation, the audience, and the message the speakers want to pass across. This means that Nigerian English online functions not only to communicate information but also to express social identity.

Overall, the study used the ideas of William Labov and Richard Hudson, which view language variation as normal and socially meaningful. Using these perspectives, the study showed that Nigerian English in digital spaces is a structured and functional variety shaped by social interaction and context. Finally, the work highlighted that online communication provides a useful space for understanding how Nigerian Pidgin English, identity, and society are closely connected in present-day Nigeria.

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