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National identity and the ownership of English in Nigeria

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Abstract

It has been argued that, especially in non-Inner Circles of English, whether or not speakers consider language to be a harbinger of national identity affects their positioning as owners of that language. A plethora of prior studies have also demonstrated that language is of central importance regarding the ways in which people enact their national identities. In the case of Nigeria, national language(s) rhetoric has been particularly contentious. This study presents findings from a larger study employing a mixed-methods approach to examine Nigerian university students' perceptions ($N = 387$) of English language ownership. Analysis revealed that respondents' sense of national identity was a major factor in enacting (English) language ownership. The findings from the study also indicated that the extent to which speakers outwith Inner Circle contexts exercise linguistic ownership over English can depend upon both the specific sociolinguistic milieu and the degree to which English expresses national identity.

KEYWORDS
national identity, Nigerian English, ownership of English, language attitudes, linguistic identity

1 | INTRODUCTION

One of the most salient markers of national identity is language. As a result, governments, together with policymakers and language planners throughout the globe, make huge material and symbolic investments to help preserve languages considered to be the national language(s) of their countries or communities (Judt & Lacorne, 2004). The tendency for many governments to view a national language as essential to safeguarding national sovereignty and reinforcing a sense of national identity and unity (Joseph, 2004) could help explain why national languages in many countries often stem from their official names or, more commonly, from their demonyms: Turkish, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc. As a result of this linked nomenclature, once mention is made of that language, the (national) identity of people from that country is immediately implicated (Suleiman, 2003). President Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of post-independent Kenya, asserted that '[t]he basis of any independent government is a national language' (cited in Crystal, 2019, p. 122), which highlights national languages are considered integral to nationhood.

It is important to briefly unpack the term 'national language'. This term is often considered alongside 'official language', and the two terms are thus often employed interchangeably. However, the terms 'national' and 'official' languages can denote different things in different countries. National languages generally refer to those languages that represent a country's cultural identity, while official languages are used for practical reasons in government and public services (Fishman, 1971). In situations where one language is assigned both roles, there is limited confusion. However, if different languages are chosen for these roles (as in the case of most postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria), there tends to be some confusion about them. In sum, while official languages serve operational purposes for public services such as education, mass media, governance, etc., the 'term national language is used…to designate that language (or those languages) whose use is viewed as furthering socio-cultural integration at the nationwide (hence 'national') level' (Fishman, 1971, p. 32).

Yugoslavia provides an interesting example of the extent to which the particular languages employed by different communities of speakers are an important aspect of the enactment of national identity. Specifically, whilst there was a general agreement amongst the Yugoslav population that they spoke one national language, following the collapse of the iron curtain in 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia into several nation-states in the early 1990s, both Serbian and Croatian were recategorised by their respective speech communities as distinct languages. The process of recategorisation involved emphasising and creating new distinctions, reviving old differences and developing unique vocabularies and grammars for each language (Moormann-Kimáková, 2015). More broadly, what speakers previously considered mutually intelligible varieties of the same language became recognised as representing four distinct languages—Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian—despite their shared linguistic roots, and because these politically disparate communities desired to enact their separate national identities.

The case of Yugoslavia provides evidence that the association between language and nation is not straightforward. In an attempt to provide a worldwide framework, Quirk (2000) outlines a tripartite model, each of which details the ways in which language may help define nations: the 'one nation–one language' model, the 'one nation–several languages' model and the 'one language–many nations' model. The 'one nation–one language' model pertains to nations where there is one obvious national language to which the vast majority of the people subscribe as a marker of their national identity (Joseph, 2004). Countries in this category include Greece, Japan and Finland. The second model, the 'one nation–several languages', provides examples where there multiple languages are spoken by a significant portion of the population in the country, most of which are usually recognised by law as national languages. Examples of countries within this category are South Africa, India, Switzerland and Nigeria.

Finally, the 'one language–many nations' model pertains to contexts whereby one specific language serves as the national language(s) of many countries (e.g., English, Arabic and Portuguese). This model is characterised by languages that are pluricentric, meaning they have multiple standard forms across different countries. To enact their individual national identities, each country formulates its own way of using the language, and these variations are significant in expressing the identity of their nations (Clyne, 1997); hence, varieties like British English, Nigerian English and American English.

Quirk (2000) acknowledges that the national linguistic identity in the 'one language–many nations' context is particularly problematic, especially in postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria, where the pluricentric language (i.e. English) coexists with other languages to which speakers might demonstrate a greater sense of identity. However, in Nigeria, much like in most postcolonial countries, the indigenous languages are regionalised, suggesting that it might be far-fetched to consider any of these forms employed as the national linguistic emblem of the nation-state. Thus, we consider it important to investigate whether—and the extent to which—Nigeria (as an outer-circle country) has developed an independent variety of English to the extent that its speakers might consider it a marker of their national identity. While scholars are generally in agreement that there is a distinctive variety of English known as Nigerian English (see Jowitt, 2019; Ugwuanyi, 2021, for a detailed discussion of its features), there are divided viewpoints among lay speakers of Nigerian English concerning its existence. While previous studies have examined the linguistic features that characterise Nigerian English, as well as aspects of attitudes towards the existence of this variety of English, no known prior study has specifically focused on the examination of the attitudes of speakers of Nigerian English towards recognising Nigerian English as Nigeria's national language. It is, therefore, considered important to investigate the extent to which Nigerians might consider Nigerian English a national language to better understand how lay speakers perceive the development of Nigerian English and its importance in the formulation of Nigerian national identity.

2 | LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

2.1 | The language situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is always associated with 'multies'—multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual etc. With an estimated population of about 250 million (UNESCO, 2021), Nigeria is the most populous Black country in the world and, in turn, the most populous country in Africa. This number is unevenly divided among over 250 ethnic nationalities, with 522 living languages. Among these languages, those spoken by the three major ethnic groups—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—are designated as national languages as well as co-official languages alongside English due to the substantial number, and cultural influence, of their speakers. Hausa, spoken by about 44 million people, is prevalent in the north, serving as both an L1 and a lingua franca among various ethnic groups in the region. Igbo, with over 30 million speakers, is primarily spoken in the southeastern part of the country. Yoruba, spoken by over 40 million people, is prevalent in southwestern Nigeria.

Four languages are assigned official status at the national level: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and English. There are thus four official languages in Nigeria (or even five official languages when French is included in light of the surprise pronouncement making French an official language by the military regime of Sani Abacha in 1996; although this proposal was never implemented). However, it may be argued that English is the sole official language in practice because, while the policy recognises official multilingualism, English is used almost exclusively in most official contexts at the national level (Simpson & Oyetade, 2008).

There exists one especially significant example of the dominance of English: while the constitution provides, in principle, that the sitting of any of the two houses of the national legislature may be conducted in any of the official languages (i.e., in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba or English), there is no evidence that any of the chambers has ever conducted its sitting in any language other than English. It has been demonstrated that language choice in the national legislature of a country is important for the national identity of that country (Taylor-Leech, 2012) precisely because it is an important national symbol. In sum, while the language policy assigns official status to at least four languages at the national level, the other official indigenous languages are used nearly exclusively at the regional level.

2.2 | Nigeria's national language debate

The dominance of English in Nigeria has raised considerable debate about which language(s) should serve as a national language(s). This topic, which has come to be termed 'the National Language Question', was hotly debated in the immediate post-independence era when the question of national identity was particularly topical, as the country had just achieved political independence and was looking to assert itself in the comity of nations. At the time, many Nigerians believed that Nigeria should adopt a national language that reflects its cultural identity rather than relying on English, which many viewed as a remnant of exploitative European colonialism. This viewpoint was largely fuelled by the belief that a national language is important not only for the national identity of a country but also for national integration, unity and development.

There have been at least six schools of thought in the Nigerian national language debate. One group contends that English, no matter how it is indigenised, lacks the capacity to serve as a national language since, in their view, it cannot be made to truly express the cultural identity of Nigerians. Those on the extreme end of this view argue that English should not even serve as an official language, let alone a national language. The number of people who promote this viewpoint seems to be on the decrease, as many Nigerians now acknowledge the use of English in Nigeria has become almost indispensable.

The second group proposed that a minority language should be chosen as the national language. The main argument in support of this view is that minority languages are not part of the ethnic power politics between Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and, therefore, are fairly ethnically neutral. One potential issue regarding this proposal, though, relates to the choice of which minority language should serve this purpose, especially considering that at present most of the minority languages are not fully codified and are often spoken by a small section of the population (Jowitt, 1995). The third proposal relates to the choice of Guosa (also known as Wazobia, coined by Igbineweka, 1981), a constructed language that combines Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (the name 'Wazobia' derives from the Yoruba word 'wa', the Hausa word 'zo' and the Igbo word 'bịa'—all meaning 'come' in all three languages). This proposal was not positively received as Guosa was considered to lack the naturalness of human languages and also because it had no speakers.

The prominent Nigerian writer and Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Wole Soyinka, leads a fourth group who propose that Swahili should be adopted as Nigeria's national language. This group believes that no Nigerian language(s) may be accepted by all the population as a national language due to ethnic rivalries. As a result, they advocate that another African language (not English) serve as the national language, especially considering the expansive role of Swahili in many African countries. Without doubt, this proposal was extremely unpopular because there were almost no speakers of Swahili in Nigeria, and, to some extent, Swahili remains foreign to Nigerians. The fifth school advocates the choice of Nigerian Pidgin (also known as Naija) as the preferred national language. The main argument in favour of this choice is that Naija is currently the most used lingua franca in Nigeria and, although lexified by English, its phonological and grammatical structures are indigenous (Elugbe & Omamor, 1991). However, Naija's heavy lexical borrowing from English and limited use in the north where Hausa dominates, coupled with the generally negative attitudes of Nigerians towards it, are arguments against its implemenation as the national language.

The last group are those who believe that English, and specifically an indigenised variety thereof, should serve as the country's national language given the wide-ranging roles it plays within both the public and private lives of Nigerians. Many argue that achieving national unity in Nigeria without the English language is highly unrealistic, given its established role as a unifying medium and its recognised function as the language of Nigerian nationalism (Jowitt, 2019). In light of this, the present study examines Nigerians' perceptions of Nigerian English as a potential national language.

2.3 | Studies on English and national identity in postcolonial contexts

While most empirical studies examining national language debates have been conducted either amongst users in non–English-speaking contexts (for overviews, see Barbour & Carmichael, 2000; Simpson, 2007, 2008; Ugwuanyi, 2022) or

within the inner circle of English (see Clark, 2013, for an overview), scant attention has been given to the specific investigation of English and national identity within non-inner circles of English (Omoniyi, 2010). Nevertheless, the findings obtained from the small number of previously conducted known studies, and especially those undertaken within postcolonial contexts comparable to Nigeria, are reviewed here. For example, Lai (2011) surveyed 586 English speakers to explore the language attitudes and identity formation in postcolonial Hong Kong. The findings revealed a complex dynamic: participants exhibited a strong attachment to Cantonese as a marker of local identity while maintaining a pragmatic attitude towards English. English was valued for its instrumental benefits, and its association with colonial history did not significantly undermine its acceptance or use. In the same context, Hansen Edwards (2015) investigated the attitudes of 307 speakers of Hong Kong English regarding their perceptions of Hong Kong English (including its role in Hong Kong national identity formation) using a questionnaire containing both close-ended and open-ended items. Among other findings, analysis found that the main reasons respondents gave for speaking Hong Kong English were related to culture and identity, and the majority stated it represented a Hong Kong identity and is unique to Hong Kong culture.

Similarly, Rezaei et al. (2014) conducted a nationwide survey involving 1,851 English users in Iran. Using a 19-item validated questionnaire, the study explored how learning and using English influenced participants' language identity and national affiliation. The analysis revealed that while Iranian English users developed a distinct identity associated with the English language, this did not seem to diminish their sense of being Iranian. The participants also expressed a strong attachment to Persian and their national identity, with English being viewed primarily as a practical tool for global communication and academic advancement. This finding is perhaps unsurprising given English does not have any official status in the country.

Two studies analysed data collected from documentary sources to examine the role of English in national identity construction in different contexts. First, Wee (2009) investigated Singapore's national language policy through the analysis of data collected from policy documents, campaign materials and national language surveys. Analysis found that while Mandarin was positioned as a national linguistic symbol for the Chinese majority in Singapore, it was perceived by many as a unifying medium for inter-ethnic communication, thus creating tension where there was no clear singular Singaporean identity, linguistically speaking, which was felt to reflect the challenges of balancing utilitarian and cultural imperatives within a multicultural society. Secondly, Hashmi et al. (2024) examined the role of the English language in the formation of Pakistan's national identity by analysing historical and contemporary sources, using data from colonial-era administrative documents, educational policies, political speeches and media texts. Through thematic analysis, it was revealed that English remains an important language for inter-ethnic and national communication, thus contrasting with efforts to promote Urdu as a national unifier. The findings indicate a dual identity struggle: English signified progress and international engagement, as well as a degree of ethnic neutrality, while also perpetuating social stratification within Pakistan (given English is not spoken by all Pakistani nationals).

In Ghana (a context comparable to Nigeria in many ways, given the close sociocultural, economic and political relationships between both countries), Anyidoho and Dakubu (2008) used a questionnaire to examine the views of 251 Ghanaians regarding adopting a national language as well as their preferences for specific languages. The findings indicated that English emerged as the most widely spoken of the languages included in the survey. Respondents generally viewed English positively. While many participants saw the value of the selection of an indigenous language to represent the national language, no clear consensus emerged. Even among speakers of Akan (which was found to be the participants' second most frequent preference after English), support for Akan as a national language was not comprehensive, reflecting the perception of English as a *de facto* Ghanaian language for national communication. Overall, the findings underscore the complexities surrounding linguistic unity, cultural identity and practical considerations in a multilingual landscape.

In Nigeria itself, while national language debates have raged for decades among scholars, policymakers and lay speakers, much of the discussion has remained commentary, with a number of proposals made, as discussed in section 2.2 above. By contrast, few empirical studies have been undertaken. For example, Akinjobi (2004) employed a survey to investigate the perceptions of 100 university students regarding the adoption of the four official languages

(Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and English) as the national language(s). Analysis found that while the majority of L1 speakers of Hausa preferred Hausa to be the national language, participants who spoke the three other languages tended to prefer English as the national language. However, as the study did not differentiate between official and national languages, it is possible that the participants considered the official status of these languages rather than viewing them as national languages, which could have thus influenced their perceptions.

The present study extends Akinjobi's (2004) work in two important ways: first, it specifically examines Nigerian nationals' perceptions of the national language, as clearly distinguished from the official language(s). This distinction is important because, as explained earlier, national language reflects a broader concept of identity. Second, the study examines perceptions of Nigerian English rather than simply English in a broader sense by focusing on Nigerian English, the study captures the nuances of language use and identity in a way that broader, global, monolithic English may not. To the best of our knowledge, no study has adopted this approach.

In light of this gap in knowledge and recent developments in the international recognition of Nigerian English, such as the addition of many Nigerian English words to the Oxford English Dictionary (which marks a growing acknowledgement of Nigerian English as a legitimate variety), it seems timely to investigate Nigerians' perceptions of Nigerian English as a marker of Nigeria's national identity. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

a. What are Nigerian university students' perceptions of Nigerian English as a marker of national identity?
b. To what extent do Nigerian university students identify with Nigerian English as a legitimate variety of English? Likewise, in what ways, if at all, does any identification influence their sense of belonging within Nigerian society?

3 | METHODS

The data utilised for this study were drawn from a large-scale study undertaken by one of the authors (Ugwuanyi, 2021), comprising questionnaire data (Study 1) and interview data (Study 2). In the larger study, there were three studies: a questionnaire, an acceptability judgement task and interviews (see Ugwuanyi, 2021). The questionnaire was administered to respondents in small groups of ten. For each group, three students were asked to volunteer to take part in the acceptability judgement task, while one of them volunteered for an interview. Since the larger study examined different aspects of Nigerian English more broadly, the acceptability judgement task data were not analysed for the present study. As such, the data presented align specifically with the aim of the present study: perceptions of Nigerians towards the role of English in the formulation of Nigeria's national identity. While detailed information on the methods employed for Studies 1 and 2 is provided by Ugwuanyi (2021), a summary of the key methodological features is presented below.

3.1 | Study 1: Survey

Study 1 was conducted amongst Nigerian undergraduate students ($N = 387$) from four universities. Given the spread of the universities (one apiece from the northwest, southeast, southwest and northcentral regions of Nigeria), it was considered that the Nigerian participants recruited were broadly representative of the three major ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), as well the speakers of minority languages. To ensure subject-specific variation, an attempt was also made to recruit students from different academic disciplines.

The age range of the sample was between 16 and 38 ($M = 22.4$). The gender distribution is relatively balanced: males were 53.2%, while females account for 46.8%. With regard to respondents' first/main language, English is the most common main language (37.7%), followed by Hausa (19.1%), Igbo (18.6%), other minority languages (14%), Yoruba (8.5%) and Nigerian Pidgin (1.8%). The largest ethnic group was Igbo (32%), followed by Hausa (22%) and

TABLE 1 Mean values and standard deviations of Nigerian university students' macro-affiliation with Nigerian English ($N = 387$).

S/N	Item	M	SD
1	Nigerian English originates from Nigerian people, so it can give me a feeling of belonging.	4.21	2.02
2	Since there is no one language spoken by all Nigerians, Nigerian English can be said to better unite us as Nigerians.	5.42	1.77
3	Nigerians can claim that English is their own language since we now use it in our own way.	5.36	1.72
4	Nigerian English is acceptable as long as Nigerians can communicate well in it.	5.47	1.59
5	Nigerian English is a legitimate variety of English just like other varieties.	5.70	1.32

Note. 1 = lowest score, 7 = highest score.

Yoruba (21.2%), and minority ethnic groups make up 24.8%. Overall, there were far more bi-/multilinguals ($n = 312$, 80.6%) than English monolinguals ($n = 74$, 19.2%). Finally, respondents were evenly distributed across four universities: University of Nigeria (25.3%), University of Lagos (25.1%), University of Jos (25.1%) and Ahmadu Bello University (24.5%).

To measure Nigerian students' perceptions of Nigerian English, seven-point Likert scale questions were developed. Specifically, the survey was divided into items which measured: (a) Nigerian university students' perceptions of the use of Nigerian English, (b) their awareness of Nigerian English, and (c) their attitudes towards Nigerian English as a variety of English. However, the survey items chosen for analysis in the present study relate specifically to perceptions of English as Nigeria's national language.

3.2 | Study 2: Interview

The interview was designed to serve as a follow-up to the issues emanating from the survey in order to add more depth. As a result, most of the items were developed in relation to insights from a preliminary perusal of the earlier instruments, particularly the questionnaire. The study adopted a semi-structured interview style in order to maintain some control (i.e., guidance and direction) while simultaneously allowing the interviewees sufficient space to express themselves. Both the questionnaire and the interviews were physically administered by one of the authors in class between January and July 2018. The interview data were transcribed and then analysed content-discursively. In the presentation of the findings in the next section, participant names are pseudonymised for anonymity.

4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 | Study 1: Survey

Preliminary descriptive statistical analysis involved the calculation of mean values of the Nigerian university students' level of affiliation with Nigerian English. The items in Table 1 measure respondents' perceptions of Nigerian English in relation to their national identity as Nigerians.

The first item in Table 1 provides information regarding whether participants' level of macro-affiliation to Nigerian English might influence their sense of belonging to Nigerian society. The Nigerian university students' positive affiliation mean scores suggest that the majority of the participants are strongly affiliated with Nigerian English because it gives them a feeling of a sense of belonging to the Nigerian community. This finding, which can be considered an indication of positive perceptions of the local variety (Bamgbose, 2001), corresponds with the views of several world Englishes scholars (e.g., Bamgbose, 2001; Kachru, 1997; Saeki, 2015) who also found that the emergence of endonor-

TABLE 2 Mean values and standard deviations of Nigerian university students' perceptions of (Nigerian) English in relation to Nigeria's national identity ($N = 387$).

S/N	Item	M	SD
1	When I speak English, I would want to retain my Nigerian-ness (i.e., my identity as a Nigerian).	5.37	1.65
2	As a Nigerian, I should speak English the way it is spoken in Nigeria.	3.83	2.07
3	Nigerians who speak only English are no less Nigerians.	4.47	2.25
4	Nigerians speaking English among themselves instead of an indigenous Nigerian language does not make them less Nigerian.	4.42	2.10

mative varieties of English tends to be contingent on speakers' desire to employ a distinct variety of English which embodies their local sociolinguistic milieus.

The high mean score for Item 2 might be interpreted as echoing an age-old belief amongst Nigerians that English represents the language of 'unity' (Udofot, 2010). One persistent argument in favour of the continued use of English in Nigeria is that it is the language that unites all Nigerians. Considering macro-affiliation in light of this unique role, it becomes even clearer why there is a high level of identification with English with regard to its role at the national level. With regard to participants' perceptions of claiming ownership in terms of the unique ways in which Nigerians use English (Item 3), the positive mean score suggests that the participants tended to agree that Nigerian English has become established to the extent that Nigerians can claim ownership of it.

The high mean score for Item 4 might be interpreted as reflecting participants' positive perceptions of Nigerian English provided speakers demonstrate ample proficiency in using it effectively. This suggests that while respondents generally accept Nigerian English as a legitimate variety of English, there remains an emphasis on communicative competence and proficiency within the variety. Finally, the mean score relating to respondents' perceptions of Nigerian English as a legitimate variety suggests that Nigerian English is widely accepted as a valid and distinct form of English, reflecting its recognition in both social and linguistic contexts. Interestingly, Hartse (2015) and Hansen Edwards (2015) have argued that a high level of acceptance amongst study participants of an endonormative variety as legitimate allows the speakers to assert both their own agency and the legitimacy of the variety of English they use, which has been found to be an indicator of English language ownership (Foo & Tan, 2019).

Study participants were requested to provide responses to four further questions investigating their perceptions of the relationship between (Nigerian) English and their sense of national identity. The descriptive statistical analysis of the participant responses is detailed in Table 2.

Analysis of the participant responses to statement 1 suggests that a participants generally expressed a desire to retain their Nigerian identity while using English. In other words, the English they speak should be a Nigerianised variety of English, which they consider important in the enactment of their identity as Nigerians. Given this result, it can be seen that the participants tend to view a connection between the kind of English they use and the sense of who they are as Nigerians. As the findings of previous studies have also shown (e.g., Lai, 2011; Wee, 2009), it seems important to speakers of English outside the inner circle how their use of English is linked to the(ir) construction of different aspects of their identities, especially in relation to their national identity.

By contrast, the Nigerian participants' perceptions of whether they should speak English the way it is spoken in Nigeria, investigated in statement 2, were generally less clear cut, i.e., the mean value was found to be close to mid-point. One possible interpretation for this seemingly ambivalent result is that while participants wished to retain their Nigerianness when speaking English (as shown by Item 1), they may be concerned that their use of English could diverge to the point where other English speakers globally might struggle to understand them (this point was specifically noted by one of the interviewees, as shown in the next section). Notably, it has been suggested that many speakers of English in countries outside the inner circle of English tend to project themselves as 'glocal' users of English in which they simultaneously aim to project themselves as global while retaining their local (linguistic) identities (Kperogi, 2015; Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2013).

The third Likert statement in this section examined how monolingual English speakers are perceived. As the majority of the participants in the present study are bi-/multilinguals, it was assumed that they might express unfavourable perceptions of Nigerians who are English monolinguals (Item 3). Contrary to this assumption, the result indicated that, overall, participants seemed to favourably perceive this group of speakers of Nigerian English. Even though the mean score does not indicate a clear majority, the analysis suggests that participants generally perceived monolingual English speakers as equally Nigerian. In fact, as shown in the interview section below, one of the interviewees stated that to be 'truly' Nigerian, one should be able to speak English since it is the language which unites Nigeria's diverse ethnolinguistic groups.

Statement 4 investigated participants' perceptions of whether participants considered that speaking to other Nigerians in English instead of an indigenous Nigerian language negatively impacted their Nigerian identity. The analysis suggests that the respondents hold relatively positive views about speaking English among themselves instead of using an indigenous language. The mean score suggests that Nigerians speaking English, instead of an indigenous language, among themselves does not diminish their sense of being Nigerian. It is likely that participants recognise the pragmatic necessity of using English in daily interactions, especially within a multilingual society where people from different language backgrounds may not share a common indigenous language. Additionally, this may reflect a growing recognition of Nigerian English as an integral part of the country's linguistic identity. In contrast to the potential marginalisation of indigenous languages in official or formal contexts, this finding suggests that the use of English does not necessarily undermine participants' sense of connection to their national identity. In turn, this may indicate a pragmatic reconciliation between the symbolic importance of indigenous languages and the linguistic realities of modern Nigerian society.

4.2 | Study 2: Interviews

This section presents the findings from interviews conducted with participants to explore their perceptions of their connection of English to national identity. As stated in the Methods section, the analysis focused on recurring themes such as the unifying function of Nigerian English, its status as a lingua franca and its symbolic value as indexical of Nigerian identity. Participants shared diverse perspectives on how English functions within the country's complex sociolinguistic landscape, providing insights into its dominance over indigenous languages in national discourse and identity construction.

The analysis of the interview data uncovered that, when asked about the role of English in Nigeria, some participants stated that the functions English performs (especially at the national level) cannot be performed by any of the indigenous languages.

> **Ihebundu** I'll say perhaps for effective communication because if someone who is a native speaker of Hausa meets another person who is a native speaker of Yoruba they need a language that they both understand to communicate. So English now comes into play since English is the lingua franca in Nigeria.

> **Jonny**: English has come as a language that serves as lingua franca so all Nigerians can speak and learn English and unite us in terms of expressing our ideas and opinions.

> **Botun**: For me, it is serving as what unites us, what helps us to communicate to one another because of our variety of languages. Someone from the south may not be able to speak Hausa…So there would have been trouble without English- big one.

As can be seen from the excerpt above, the participants appear to share the view that English is the only language Nigerians can use to 'communicate to one another'. Both Jonny and Ihebundu used the technical term 'lingua franca'

to describe the role of English in Nigeria. Analysis revealed that three other participants used the term in other contexts to describe the role of English in Nigeria. For Botun, 'there would have been trouble without English', perhaps considering the ethnolinguistic polarisation in the country (Orabuchi, 2019).

This ethnolinguistic polarisation and the fear of within-country linguistic imperialism might contribute to why many Nigerians do not seem to accept the current institutionalisation of only three languages as national languages (Jowitt, 2019). Moreover, interviewees who do not speak any of the three languages currently designated national languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) tended to express resentment towards the language policy that recognises only three languages as national languages. Also, even those interviewees who speak one of the national languages expresed resentment towards their use in national discourse. For instance, Kelechi says, '…our president, because he is Fulani-Hausa, cannot just come and give presidential talks in Hausa language or maybe their Fulani language. So English is like the bedrock for (everything) in Nigeria. So without English…just like tower of Babel [laughs] you know'.

Interestingly, in the case of the present study, Isape specifically refers to English as the country's national language:

> You have to learn and speak English… Or let me say English is like the connecting language. I guess the erm the language that we use in place of a national language… so in place of a national language we make use of English and it's serving the purpose it's working well I guess. In fact, English is our national language.

Although ethnic identity politics in Nigeria is highly complex, the data analysis suggests that English often emerges as the pragmatic choice for national discourse, owing to its perceived neutrality and unifying role amid the country's diverse linguistic landscape (Bamgbose, 1990). If any public transaction is conducted in the national languages, the constitution stipulates that adequate arrangements are made for each or all of the three languages, in addition to English. However, such arrangements may spark dissent among speakers of minority languages and language rights advocates.

Analysis of interviewees' comments regarding the extent to which using English might affect one's Nigerian identity uncovered a range of opposing perceptions. Ihebundu, commenting on whether Nigerian English can be accepted by Nigerians as the language which most represents a Nigerian identity, stated:

> It can if we are ready to embrace it. That's the thing. To me, there's no problem with Nigerian English. I school myself to make sure that if I am talking anywhere I am talking the same way because there was a time I would say everybody is welcome, everybody is ready to ((speaking in an atypical Nigerian accent)). After a while I said no I am not happy it's not- it does not sound like me. I want to be myself everywhere.

Although Ihebundu was specifically referring to her own Nigerian English accent, her assertion seems indicative of the extent to which Nigerian English seems to be demonstrative of her identity as a Nigerian. This view was echoed by other interviewees who remarked that any Nigerian who speaks English with a non-Nigerian accent is pretentious. In relation to a further interview comment with regard to Nigerians who speak English with an atypical Nigerian accent, Botun narrated a story which underscores her perception of such linguistic behaviour:

> I had this friend who travelled outside Nigeria for summer holidays, she just spent two months and when she came back we were hearing oh my gosh, hi guys, oh my I can't sit here [said in atypical Nigerian accent]. Everybody was like why is this one **forming** *haba*.

In Nigerian English, 'to form' means 'to pretend'. Many other participants used this sense of the word to describe such speech styles, often associating them with pretentiousness or a desire to emulate foreign linguistic identities. The

term 'to form', in this context, encapsulates a broader sociolinguistic commentary on how certain patterns of speech—particularly those perceived as atypical of Nigerian English—may be interpreted as attempts to project a non-Nigerian identity that aligns more closely with external cultural norms than with local authenticity. One incident that supports this viewpoint relates to the 2017 edition of BBNaija (a very popular reality TV show in Nigeria), where one of the housemates (Gifty) received a lot of criticism from many Nigerians for her 'un-Nigerian accent' and which was frequently referred to as 'fake' (The Sun, 2017). In fact, in a later interview, Gifty herself acknowledged that her accent may have contributed to her eviction (Vanguard, 2017). Such perceptions highlight the role of language not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of cultural belonging and authenticity in the Nigerian sociolinguistic landscape.

Interviewees generally expressed the view that not speaking an indigenous Nigerian language does not undermine one's identity as a Nigerian. More specifically, many expressed the view that, if given the option to speak only one language, they would prefer to choose English. Mape, for example, commented:

> You cannot go and say your native language is Yoruba, you grew up speaking Yoruba so you can't speak English. But I can go somewhere and say I grew up speaking English, I can't speak Yoruba. I don't think that will really affect my chances of getting job because English is very important in Nigeria.

Mape's reason for this preference is underpinned by some utilitarian considerations, which is unsurprising given that English is generally affords high levels of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) as, in Nigeria, it grants one greater access to economic and social mobility. However, her statement shows that she considers English an essential component of one's identity as a Nigerian.

Other responses to whether being an English-only speaker impacts one's sense of being Nigerian are detailed in the excerpts below:

> **Jonny**: Somebody may grow up in Lagos or other places where they may not be able to speak a Nigerian language. But of course he's still a Nigerian because- like now I can't speak Yoruba neither can I speak Igbo but I'm still a Nigerian. So whether one speaks English only or Hausa only or English and Hausa it does not matter you are still a full-blooded Nigerian.

> **Mape**: Like British people won't say they won't be able to speak English. So I should be able to like speak Yoruba although I don't. Like I said **Nigerian English it gives you a sense of identity in Nigeria same way American English gives Americans a sense of identity in America**.

> **Isape**: I believe no it doesn't affect your status as a Nigerian. Speaking English or not shouldn't- no doesn't affect. I wanted to say shouldn't but I think it doesn't…. But they are Nigerians and in Nigeria…. Not that they are- they are not less Nigerians but it's not just proper.

> **Kelechi**: I believe Nigeria should be one and this Igbo Hausa Yoruba should just be scrapped out because it's causing a lot of trouble….My grandmother might be more Igbo than I am but not more Nigerian.

As can be seen from the above excerpts, the participants stated that speaking English has become an essential aspect of one's identity as a Nigerian. For instance, Mape specifically mentioned that Nigerian English indexes her Nigerian identity in a similar way to which American English or British English respectively expresses American or British identity.

Ihebundu's comments below, by contrast, seem to express a degree of ambivalence. She expressed the view that her inability to speak Igbo or any other indigenous Nigerian language might affect her appropriation of Nigerian identity in specific contexts:

Ihebundu: The thing is most times I feel less Nigerian than (other) Nigerians because if I am outside Nigeria where other people speak English and I see somebody that is a Nigerian let's say from my place I cannot speak my dialect to the person. So I feel less Nigerian than other Nigerians who can speak their languages most of the time. Then the other times I don't feel anything at all.

Ihebundu's position here echoes the scholarly view that when people migrate to another country, their language practices tend to change (e.g., Kerswill, 2006; Ugwuanyi & Oyebola, 2022). Ihebundu seems to express that her inability to speak any indigenous Nigerian language undermines her Nigerianness, especially with regard to when she meets another Nigerian outside of the country and in contexts where she might need to speak the language to them to show solidarity.

Overall, analysis of the interview comments indicated that participants mentioned a number of ways in which Nigerian English indexes their Nigerian identity. Respondents seem to suggest that no one of the national languages can index Nigerianness to the extent which Nigerian English is able to. This seems to be because most indigenous languages are chiefly relevant regionally rather than nationally within Nigeria. These results are broadly consistent with evidence uncovered by Hansen Edwards (2015) in a study investigating the connection between English and national identity in Hong Kong, another postcolonial context. Specifically, Hansen Edwards (2015) found that speakers of Hong Kong English generally perceived their English as affording high symbolic value in portraying their national identity. In other words, a sense of national identity seems important when speakers of English outside the inner circle claim ownership of the language Bokhorst-Heng et al. (2007).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study has explored Nigerian university students' perceptions of (Nigerian) English regarding the expression of Nigeria's national identity. Both the survey and interview data reveal that the Nigerian participants tended to perceive English as the only language capable of bridging communication gaps across Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape. As explained above, one reason for this perception is that many Nigerians consider a common language as key to national unity. By contrast, most Nigerians do not believe it is possible for any of the indigenous languages of Nigeria to be trully national in terms of being used, understoood and accepted across the length and breadth of the country. Analysis of data from Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that many participants perceived Nigerian English as integral to their identity as Nigerians, akin to the ways in which particular varieties of American English, British English and other world varieties of English are indexical of the respective national identities of the people who speak them (Clark, 2013). This finding reflects a broader trend where English, despite its colonial origins, has been adapted to express a specifically Nigerian identity.

Overall, the findings from the present study suggest that while indigenous languages are important cultural symbols, the respondents' comments seemed to suggest that (Nigerian) English is pragmatically positioned to serve as Nigeria's sole national language. This finding reflects the broader trend where localised English varieties, such as Nigerian English, hold high symbolic value and reflect national identity, a dynamic seen in other English-speaking contexts (Hansen Edwards, 2015). When evaluated from the lens of Schneider's dynamic model (2003), this evolving role of English in Nigeria indicates that English in Nigeria has been steadily progressing through the developmental stages described in the model. The findings of this study further support the claims of Ugorji (2015) and Ugwuanyi (2021), who posit that Nigerian English has indeed reached the advanced stages of development as an independent variety of English.

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of English in Nigerian national identity, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. First, the sample is limited to university students, and the responses of this group may not fully capture the perspectives of a broader cross-section of the Nigerian population. The study also involved primarily the calculation of descriptive statistical analysis as well as self-reported perceptions through direct methods

such as interviews. While these methods provided rich data, they may not have captured participants' nuanced and complex linguistic repertoires, such as differences based on sociobiographic variables—a focus for future studies to consider. Furthermore, some of the questions posed to participants were lengthy, which may have led to confusion or misinterpretation. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of Nigerians beyond solely university students as well as incorporating more advanced inferential statistical analysis to ascertain any statistical significance between the mean values uncovered. Additionally exploring the perceptions of speakers of Nigerian English resident in non-urban contexts could provide a more nuanced understanding of the roles of English in the formulation of national identity in Nigeria by offering insights that allow for broader generalisations across diverse sociocultural settings. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the understanding of the ways in which, as well as the extent to which, Nigerian English serves as a marker of national identity. The findings moreover point to the evolving role of English in postcolonial contexts and open avenues for further exploration of its symbolic and functional roles in nation-building.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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