In Nigerian Pidgin English, commonly known as Naija, plurality of reference of a Noun Phrase can be indicated in one of five discrete ways, which are evidently derived from plural-marking strategies in several different source languages. Marking plurality with a plural –s suffix on the noun is clearly based on standard English, while the use of numbers and quantifiers to indicate plural referents are no doubt universal options. Other plural-marking strategies in Naija may derive from the Nigerian languages that are the L1 of most Naija speakers: for example, the use of NP-initial dem (the third person plural pronoun) closely parallels the use of awon (also a 3rd pl pronoun) in Yoruba, and the reduplication of adjectives (e.g., fine-fine girl = ‘fine girls’, big-big house = ‘many big houses’) also parallels similar structures in Yoruba. Finally, Naija, like Igbo, Yoruba, and some other Nigerian languages, uses zero marking, in which the number of an unmarked NP must be determined from context.

The present study examines the use of these strategies in the speech of 26 subjects drawn from most of the regions of Nigeria. The subject speakers have five different L1s, and include men and women, from a range of educational levels and ages. We examine the social and linguistic constraints governing plural-marker choice, using Goldvarb. Overall, -s plural marking is the most common strategy encountered, accounting for about half the data, followed by zero marking and use of numerals and quantifiers. Dem is the least favored strategy. The most prominent linguistic constraint on marker choice is animacy of antecedent: animate antecedents strongly favor –s suffixation (with a factor weight of .931, vs. .225 for inanimates), and disfavor reduplication (factor weight .119, vs. .721 for inanimates) and zero marking (.125, vs. inanimates .716), but do not significantly affect use of dem.

Among the social constraints, speakers’ level of education is the most significant, with higher educational levels systematically favoring more –s marking and disfavoring other strategies. This suggests a tendency towards standard English influence on the contemporary development of Naija. Remarkably, speakers’ L1 is rarely significant, despite considerable differences between the substrate languages in plural-marking strategies. Thus native speakers of languages that mark plurality with inflections (like Hausa and Edo) are no more likely to use the –s suffix in Naija, nor are speakers of zero-marking languages like Igbo and Yoruba more likely to use zero marking in Naija. This suggests that substrate interference is not a significant factor in contemporary Naija usage; on the contrary, the language appears to exhibit autonomy and convergence among speakers of many regions and linguistic backgrounds, and of different social backgrounds, given the nonsignificance of the other social factors investigated (age and gender). These results are consistent with the claim that Naija is emerging as a de facto national language and lingua franca of Nigeria, despite its low social status.