STANDARD NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A VARIETY FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION
IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There are varieties of English language in Nigeria but the variety that is pragmatic for effective communication in Nigeria, is Nigerian English. Nigerian English is the variety of English used by Nigerians with distinctive Phonological features, culturally based lexical items and nuances. It is a form of English that expresses Nigerian identity, so, it is desirable for our national pride. Thus, whatever the prejudice against it and its usage, this paper is of the opinion that its various forms should be standardized and institutionalized so as to facilitate effective communication. Finally, the paper recommends that standardized and institutionalized Nigerian English will improve Nigerians’ performance in the use of English and it will help to develop closer rapport among Nigerians and this will enhance understanding, national development, integration and unity.

Introduction

Language is incontrovertibly central to all human activities and the functions performed by language are of crucial relevance to peaceful co-existence among members of a society and to the achievement of whatever goals that are envisaged by the society. Thus, language and society are said to be so intricately woven together such that any attempt to separate them along parallel lines will only be an exercise in futility. It is often believed that without it, no social organization can function properly.

Language according to Ngara (1982), is not only words and grammatical structures, the use of a language carries with it prejudices, habits and mannerisms. Also, Wa Thiong (1986), states that language is not a mere string of words but it has a suggestive power well beyond the immediate lexical meaning. This is why many Nigerians frown on the use of English Language in the conduct of our national affairs. Brook (1979) sees language as a form of social behaviour that reflects such variations as dialect, idiolect, occupation (register), mode (written or spoken) as well as time.

For now in Nigeria, we may not be able to choose any of the three approved major indigenous languages to be used as lingua franca, national language or as a means for effective communication because according to Osuafor (2002), it will bring such political problems like mutual suspicion and the fear of ethnic domination. But standard Nigerian English, will allay the fear of mutual suspicion and the fear of ethnic domination. Nigerian English is a variety of English used by Nigerians with distinctive phonological features, culturally based lexical items and nuances. Nigerian English is aco-hyponym or variety of American English, British English and Australian English, that is used to transmit and project our image and culture, it is the vehicle and the basic instrument for the transportation of information in Nigeria, it is the basic means by which Nigerians disseminate their thoughts and feelings to one another.

Although, many people have argued that Nigerian English is a misnomer, others bluntly assert that there is no such thing as Nigerian English. A few dismiss the idea of Nigerian English by contending that it is a mere aberration. Such arguments have little or no socio-linguistic basis to carry them beyond the frontiers of academic exercise and sheer linguistic romanticism. Thus, to buttress the existence of Nigerian English, Bamgbose (1982), tells the amusing story of an important personality who denied that Nigerian English existed but when he was interrupted a few minutes later; he used the Nigerian English expression “let me land.” On being informed that a certain expression in his speech or writing is a Nigerian form not found in British English, he resolve, perhaps almost unconsciously, to cease using it forthwith and to use the British English expression instead. Consequently, there is Nigerian English just as there is the Indian and other geographically based varieties. Also, many scholars have described Nigerian English and characterized the varieties from various perspectives: geographical (regional & ethnic), Social and Socio-linguistic.

Nigerian English: Myth or Reality

In Nigeria, a second language variety of English has been institutionalized according to Kachru (1986). As a former British colony, Nigeria has experienced a long interaction of English and indigenous languages, and this has led to the indigenization or nativization of English in Nigeria. Thus, the nativization
of English in Nigeria according to Bamgbose (1995), is not limited to the usual features of transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of Nigerian languages into English, it also includes the creative development of English, including the evolution of distinctively Nigerian usages, attitudes and pragmatic use of the language. Therefore, nativization of English in Nigeria, reflects the peculiarities of the Nigerian situation and its people.

Again, varieties of English in Nigeria according to Brosnahan (1958), depends essentially on the level of education, exposure to forms of Standard English and the extent of mother tongue transfers (Banjo, 1995). This means that one may distinguish among various ethnic (mother tongue influenced) Englishes, and also, between the standard Nigerian English and the various forms of substandard English which according to Igboanusi (2000 & 2001) is dependent on the level of education. Also, Jowitt (1991) aptly captures the picture of the varieties of Nigerian English in his observation that the usage of every Nigerian user is a mixture of standard forms and popular Nigerian English forms which are in turn composed of errors and variants. However, these legitimate variants, Bamgbose (1998), says are contrasted with British English forms.

Consequently, from the above discussion, it shows that Nigerian English is not a myth but is a reality. It is part of the social and political history of the country. It presupposes the existence of a standard form of expression that serves as normative guidance to non-native users of the English language in Nigeria. Nigerian English can therefore, be defined as the type of English spoken and written in Nigeria as different from any other variety spoken or written in any other place or country where English is extensively used as an important first or second language. It is any variety of English construction that reflects the phonological, structural and semantic properties that can be identified as “Nigerianism” in that they show some characteristics of Nigerian languages. Thus, when any Nigerian speaks English, no matter his level of education, other speakers of English have no difficulty identifying the accent or style as Nigerian. Walsh (1967) opines that Nigerian English exists as a type of English with regional varieties, which are equated with various ethnicities. He explained that the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter their first language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English. Also, in discussing whether there is anything like Nigerian English, Bamgbose (1971), says that one can point to the features, which are becoming typical of the varieties of English spoken in Nigeria. Adetugbo (1979), sees Nigerian English as varieties of English used in Nigeria and linguistically, Nigerian English is a dialect of the English language while Jibril (1979), describes it as a term that has now come to be recognized and accepted as referring to a legitimate sub-type of English. Also, Osuafor (2002) says Nigerian English emerged as a result of deviation from the norms of standard British English as a result of Nigerian speakers’ familiarity with their mother tongues or first language. Thus, these variant forms that result from the use of English in Nigerian, as a contact environment is what he called Nigerian English.

Furthermore, Nigerian English is the variety of English used by Nigerians with distinctive phonological features and culturally based lexical items and nuances. It is also, that variety of English that has undergone Nigerianization or Indigenization. Bamgbose (1995), in his account of Nigerian English, refers to this as nativization. He argues that nativization of English in Nigeria is not limited to the usual features of transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of Nigerian languages into English, it is also concerned with the creative development of English, including the evolution of distinctively Nigerian usages, attitudes and pragmatic use of the language. He further, identifies three forms of Nigerian English: Contact English from which Nigerian pidgin and Broken English emerged, Victorian English and School English.

Finally, according to Adejare (1995), Nigerian English as a regional dialect has its own varieties as basilect, mesolect and acrolect.
Characteristics of Nigerian English

Nigerian English is characterized by nativization, a term coined by Bamgbose. According to Bamgbose (1995), such nativization consists of three aspects namely: Linguistic, pragmatic and creative.

The Linguistic nativization includes: the substitution of Nigerian language vowels and consonants for English ones, replacement of stress by tone, pluralization of some non-court nouns, introduction of culture-specific vocabulary items, back formation, semantic shift, different verb- preposition combinations and some Nigerian mother tongue induced syntactical structures.

The second aspect of nativization in Nigerian English is the pragmatic use of English in a second language situation. This is a situation where the rules of language use typical of English in native situations have been modified under pressure from the cultural practices of the Nigerian environment. Consequently, Nigerian English replicates numerous indigenous greetings like: welcome, well done, sorry, thanks for yesterday, safe journey, how? Till tomorrow, etc. For instance, “sorry” is used to condole a person who has lost some one. The statement ‘I am coming” is used instead of “going” in a situation where a native speaker would say: “excuse me, I will be back in a moment”. In addition, modes of address are formalized to reflect social status and age. This may generate the use of multiple titles or the use of appellations and titles where they do not apply. Again, someone addressed as “father”, may be no more than an elder in one’s village, and may not in the least bit related to the speaker. In another instance, the writer has observed that children tend to address every adult male as uncle and every adult female as aunty. Thus, this kind of semantic shift is based on the cultural understanding that children are not supposed to call adults by their names as a mark of respect. These are instances of how Nigerian culture has impinged on language use.

The third aspect of nativization is creativity. This manifests in two ways: firstly, expressions are coined to reflect the Nigerian experience or worldview. Expressions such as: to take in (to become pregnant), sufferhead (a luckless person), arrangee (someone employed in illegal deals), long-leg (to gain undue favour), four-one-nine (a dupe). Secondly, authentic Nigerian native idiom is translated into English in such a way as to reflect the mood of the situation. Chinua Achebe, generously employs this device in his works.

Furthermore, next to nativization is the continuing influence of biblical language such as: it came to pass, the alpha and Omega, coming like a thief in the night, the spirit indeed is willing, the. evening is far spent etc. These are found in non-literary discourse. This is also evidence in many literary works. For instance, in Ideal Friendship written by Umeasiegbu, Franca bursts into a negative romantic version of the beatitudes (p.34).

Finally, an increasingly important characteristic of Nigerian English is the influence of Americanisms. This is as a result of such influences from electronic communication revolution, exposure through travel, pop music, American trained professionals, printed materials and technical manuals written in American English. Also, apart from such vocabulary items such as: shorts, station- wagon, custom-made, vacation, garbage, trash, among others (see Awonusi, 1994), it extends to expressions such as: Monday through Friday, protest an action, passed away, check out a book, pass the buck, go down town.

Standard Nigerian English

Every language exists to facilitate social interaction. In a situation where English is in contact with many local languages, and where English is a second language, it is to be expected that the kinds of English found will be different from the varieties of English spoken in countries where English is the mother tongue. With this, Nigerian English is quite different from British or American English. Thus, Nigerian English has special features. Its vocabulary contains a large number of words, which are either not found in British English or are used in ways peculiar to the Nigerian situation. As more and more Nigerians from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds now write and speak English, it becomes necessary to reflect in a reasonably organized manner as much as possible the richness of standard Nigerian English. Thus, Nigerian English is more effective for our local communication than the international varieties; consequently, it is high time we realized that it is a functional variety. So, the use of English in Nigeria should be reworked to reflect our social context.

Standard Nigerian English is a set of grammatical, phonological and lexical forms used by educated Nigerians either in speech or writing. It is a form, which native speakers of the language will
fully understand and appreciate. Also, it is usually associated with the form used by the educated members of the society for formal national and international communication.

However, the concept of standard Nigerian English is still fraught with problems because the yardstick for its measurement is still the native speakers’ standard. As Adjeare (1995) citing Kujore (1985), has observed, the lack of clearly defined criteria for defining educated ESL (English as a second language) has meant, with specific reference to Nigerian English, that both unacceptable deviation and creative variations are lumped together as error. It is therefore evident that standard Nigeria English is rooted in approved syntactic patterns and idiomatic collocations one would find in the native speaker standard model.

Finally, a defect of standard Nigerian English is that, it is bookish as Ubahakwe (1974), has noted and sometime suffers from hypercorrection.

Communication and Society

Communication is the process of transmitting thoughts, information, ideas or feelings between individuals or organization through the use of arbitrary symbols (spoken or written), linguistic signs or symbols which the addresser and the addressee understand. Thus, it is the transmission of messages from a sender to a receiver with the necessary presence of feedback, which could be spontaneous, verbal, and /or action based.

According to Little (1977), communication is the process by which information is passed between individuals and/or organization by means of previously agreed symbols. Huebsch (1986) says communication could also mean any or the totality of these:

i) A tool for the promotion of understanding.
ii) A process that enables one to express ideas through the use of symbols and other visual aids.
iii) A mechanism for bringing people to one another.
iv) A process for the promotion of behaviour or character modification.

Thus, communication is a give-and-take phenomenon in the absence of barriers. It shapes the work we do, the home we live in, the things we invent, it determines the friends we make, the peace we enjoy, the crisis we provoke and the wars we fight. Consequently, communication is one of the most wonderful affairs of mankind through which things pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man. Thus, it can build a polity of bliss, it can replace pandemonium and chaos with peace, it can create and it can destroy.

Furthermore, effective communication is the form of communication, which achieves its goals or purposes. Effective communication in standard Nigerian English must therefore be seen in this perspective. A question that readily comes to mind is what would we require standard British English for since other forms of Nigerian English can be used for effective communication? Standard Nigerian English is the medium of formal education and day-to-day administration. It is a medium for the expression of our national consciousness and experiences, a linch-pin for politics, religion, trade and other processes.

Finally, we can infer from the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity to argue that standard Nigerian English maps out the world for Nigerians at varying degrees of intensity based on their competence level.

Nigerian English as a Means of Communication

The primary function of a language is that, it is a means of communication. Of all the means of communication, language is the most effective. Consequently, for effective communication in Nigeria, standard Nigerian English will be more effective than standard British and American English. Nigerian English makes more meaning to Nigerians than an international variety because, it is generally acceptable.

Some of the words that have developed in Nigerian English and used for effective commutation are:

i) Hear (smell) for perceived smell
ii) Big man for wealthy/ important man
iii) Light for electricity
iv) Curse for abuse
The list could go on and on. This list does not include Nigerian English words that hardly feature in standard British English forms. For instance, naming ceremony is an occasion in which a newly born child is formally given a name, has no standard British English equivalent since naming ceremonies do not feature in British culture. The same thing is applicable to smoking/drinking garri, which does not exist in the British menu.

There are also culturally loaned words used for effective communication that enrich the Nigerian English lexicon. These include: akamu, akara, eba, egusi, garri, oghono, soya, dodo, oga, abi, chewing-stick, pounded yam etc. Again, some reduplications like: small small, now now, well well, before before, fast fast etc are also used for effective communication and they found their way into Nigerian English through pidgin English, and in most usages, these reduplications have their equivalents in the Nigerian Languages.

In addition, idiomatic variations are also present in Nigerian English for effective communication. These include:
To be on seat/not on seat - to be in the office or not.
To take in — to become pregnant.
To be with - to be in one’s possession.
To move with — to associate with.

Such Nigerian expression like: Sorry and well done according to Bamgbose (1971) used as a sign of sympathy or as greeting to anyone at work are not appropriate under the same conditions in British or American English, but they are appropriate in Nigerian English and are used for effective communication.

Also, the spoken form of English in Nigeria is marked by peculiarities that distinguish it from British English form. Nigerian speakers have attributed this variation mainly to various interference features in English pronunciation. In fact, the major index for identifying most regional varieties of Nigerian English is based on the phonetic and phonological criteria. Thus, in spite of all these, they make sense to us in Nigeria because they are used to meet the needs of local communication and they serve a lot of socio-cultural functions.

Furthermore, renowned writers from different parts of the world have localized the English language and their works are not only read worldwide but they are well understood. For instance, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, there are features of Nigerian English, likewise that of Wole Soyinke. In Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood*, there are also forms of English with African flavour.

Finally, the fact that we should always remember is that, the flora must influence the foreign language that is used as a medium of communication outside its native home. Thus, Achebe (1975), observers that the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. This is the reality in Nigeria and we do not need any devolution to institutionalize Nigerian English because it consists of variants that are socially and internationally intelligible and acceptable.

**Recommendations:** Every language exists to facilitate social communication and interaction. Standard Nigerian English is more effective for our local communication than the international varieties. Thus, from the research carried out and in line with issues raised in the discourse, it is quite clear that standard Nigerian English is a feasible project. This paper suggests that research work on standard Nigerian English should be intensified intensively, codify it appropriately, institutionalize and standardize all its various forms (spoken or written) for a common system. Also, the process of compiling the dictionary, grammar and pronunciation should be set in motion for reference purposes. This can be achieved in the following ways:

i) Organizing conferences/workshops for language teachers to consider the various forms of Nigerian English so as to evolve a monolithic system.

ii) Nigerian linguists should explore the various forms of Nigerian English so as to facilitate its standardization.

iii) Articles in national and international journal, jingles and informative campaigns should be used to sensitize the world on standard Nigerian English so that it can be given international recognition. Consequently, if standard Nigerian English is codified, standardized and institutionalized, this research work recommends that:

i) It should be acceptable for use as the medium of communication and instruction in schools, teaching and conducting examinations. Thus, it will help students perform better in their English language examinations because they will be using the form of English that they are much acquainted with.

ii) It will create good rapport among Nigerian users of English and this will enhance understanding and national unity.

iii) Standard Nigerian English has the potential for sustaining the needs of the Nigerian people for informative and conative purpose. Thus, the anti-corruption campaign of the federal government is better canvassed in standard Nigerian English than in British English. This is because; it is a campaign against the corrupt practices of the ruling elite.

iv) It will also be an asset for national development and integration.

v) It will make the means of communication and interaction very effective among Nigerians because it is common to all of us in this country.

**Conclusion**

In this research we have stated unequivocally that the existence of standard Nigerian English for effective communication is incontrovertible. Standard Nigerian English is not insulated from code
switching and code-mixing processes, it is a variety of English that has Nigerian flavour which consists of variants that are socially and internationally intelligible and acceptable among the educated Nigerians. It is more effective for local communication than the British English. The school strand English according to Bamgbose (1995), which is the form used in the media, the judiciary, education, politics and parliamentary procedures, is the highest form of standard Nigerian English.

Thus, Bamgbose (1995), states that the English language has undergone modifications in the Nigerian environment, it has been pidginised, nativised, acculturated and twisted to express unaccustomed concepts and modes of interaction. As a result, it is now Nigerian English at par with other World Englishes. Also, Achebe (1965), states that Nigerian English is now a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

However, factors that militate against the institutionalization and standardization of Nigerian English include: the proliferation of substandard English language texts, home videos and radio programmes, high level of illiteracy and high cost of education which has made many Nigerian children to remain in the streets and these children are satisfied with the use of pidgin or broken English in their daily activities. Against this background, standard Nigeria English is bound to remain the social dialect of the elite.

Finally, standard Nigerian English is an asset for national development; it is a boost to our international trade and relations. It is the corner stone of our educational and political system. Consequently, if we nature and sustain it, it will remain strategic as our national window to the world and it may indeed be the solution to inter-tribal unity which has hitherto eluded us.

References


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