

THE USE OF ENGLISH BY DELTA STATE POLYTECHNICS STUDENTS: A STUDY OF THE MORPHO-SYNTACTIC AND LEXICO-SEMANTIC FEATURES OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Nigerian English (NA) is a variety distinct from the standard variety known as British English (BE). According to Ogu (1992:88), and Walsh (1967), the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, irrespective of their mother tongue have enough features in common to depict a general type, which may be called Nigerian English. Based on this assertion, this paper sets out to identify the morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic features of Nigerian English in the use of language by the students of Delta Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Ukwu by examining the socio-cultural environment in which English is used. Through detailed study, it was observed that the English Language has been cultivated, re-domesticated and indigenized to accommodate the culture and tradition of the people who

use it, and as such has acquired local colour and content. This makes it distinct from the native speaker variety with features reflected at the semantic (meaning) level. Both the pragmatic and lexico-semantic features are among other issues characterizing the Nigerian English and posing a challenge to the notions of international intelligibility and acceptability. This paper recommends that polytechnic students and other Nigerian learners should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of voracious reading of newspapers, textbooks, literary texts and magazines written by native speakers and Nigerian authors, in order to differentiate between the two set of authors in terms of their cultural backgrounds and linguistic systems as reflected in their texts. This will enable language learners surmount any deviation as well as acquaint themselves with native speaker's usages.

INTRODUCTION

Notion of Nigerian English

Different scholars like Bamgbose (1992,1995), Banjo (1995), Jowitt (1991), and Adejare (1995) have established the inevitability of English in a second language situation and have dealt extensively with varieties of English as distinct from British, American and Australian English. Bamgbose (1995), states that the present form and status of the English language in Nigeria is as a result of the contact between it and Nigerian languages in socio-cultural and political situations. He identifies five factors as being

responsible for the change of the English language in the Nigerian environment namely educational, political, cultural, socio-linguistic and linguistic influences.

On the other hand, the language situation in Nigeria is very complex. According to Oyeleye (1994), it is a defacto multilingual nation. He further notes that this is justified in the sense that in any practical situation requiring language interaction, there are two choices open to us Nigerians: one of the local indigenous languages or English. The local languages are used in informal and non-official situations while English is reserved for formal situations. In the same vein, Taiwo (2007) observed that the increasing adoption of English as a second language has caused a hybrid language to evolve in order to meet the cultural and communication needs of the speakers. Nigeria has about 400 indigenous languages out of which Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have official recognition. Babajide (2001) explains that the choice of Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo was based on the fact that these three languages are far more developed with regards to linguistics and literature than the others. Besides, they are more widely used in the country than the others.

The English language in Nigeria has undergone ‘domestication’ (Achebe, 1975), ‘localization’ (Kachru, B. 1983), and ‘Nativization’ (Odumuh, 1993). These name tags are central to explaining the fact that English has come to stay with us and we are in the process of transferring, planting and developing the language in a non-native

environment. Thus, in Achebe's view, we should use the language to express our thought patterns and perform needed tasks instead of looking at it as the language of colonizers.

Furthermore, Odebunmi (2006) observed that socio-cultural differences that exist between the Anglosaxons and Nigerians allow new lexical items to develop. He explains that before the introduction of the English language in Nigeria, the indigenous languages were employed to express thoughts, customs, experiences, and the people's way of life and as English is now used in inter and intra-ethnic communication, new lexical items are bound to evolve to talk about such thoughts, customs, experiences and tradition. Ogunsiji (2007) states that when a Nigerian speaks English, no matter his level of education, native speakers of English have no difficulty identifying the speaker as a Nigerian because of the influence of some structural characteristics of indigenous Nigerian languages.

Also, in his view, Jowitt (1991) affirms that 'nigerianism' should not invariably be seen as evidence of the imperfect learning of English, but deserved to be considered as possible signs of acculturation, and of the creative capacity that we normally associate with learning and use of the mother tongue. According to him, we might regard Nigerian English as English that has England as its first mother and Nigeria as its second, and has defiled nature by undergoing a linguistics restructuring re-processing, adding that there is no law of nature or man

stipulating that a language must be considered the exclusive ‘possession’ of the people who were its first ‘owner’.

However, the English language that the colonial masters bequeathed to us and which the speakers use is not exactly the same English we use in Nigeria today. Although there are certain “common core” features running through these varieties as there are a set of grammatical and other characteristic features which are common to both the native-speaker variety (Standard British English) and the Nigerian variety of English, Nigerian English is different in a number of features. These features of Nigerian English which leads to variety differentiation are phonological, syntactic, lexical, semantic and pragmatic in nature. This paper however concentrates on the morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic features of Nigerian English as used by polytechnic students in their everyday use of the English language.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of language contact variation propounded by Uriel Weinreich (1953, 1968) forms the theoretical framework of this study. Uriel Weinreich can rightly be described as the “father” of modern day contact linguistics as he presented a systematic framework for the categorization of the mutual influence and mixing that take place when languages come in contact. Since then, several linguists, sociolinguists and anthropological linguists have

observed and analyzed this phenomenon in different parts of the world.

Each of the new Englishes (American, Australian, Indian, British, Nigerian) has distinct characteristics, as well as distinct linguistic and cultural identities largely due to the different historical, geographical, political and socio-cultural factors that gave birth to them. Thus, Nigerian English will differ from either Indian English or Ghanaian English. However, each variety will also have various sub-varieties or dialects, reflecting its multilingual environment.

Also, the designation 'Nigerian English' raises a pertinent question; does a Hausa speaker of NE use English exactly the same way as a Yoruba or Igbo speaker? If the answer is in the negative, the next question is: what constitutes NE? The argument advanced by both language specialists and teachers of language indicates that there is really no consensus opinion yet to what constitutes NE. The opinions range from an outright rejection of its existence, to those who take its existence for granted and use the term without defining or questioning it. In between these two extremes is a continuum of various definitions, descriptions and analyses.

The Place of English in the Nigerian Educational System

In the area of education, language is an indispensable tool for the dissemination of knowledge not only to school pupils and students but also to the masses

who have had the opportunity to go through the formal school system (Adeyanju 2004). According to *The National Policy on Education* (2004), English shall be the medium of instruction from the fourth year in Nigerian primary schools. Akindele and Adegbite (2005), remarked that it is inevitable that for a long time to come, English will indisputably be the medium of instruction for higher education in Nigeria. They observe further that the language has no rival among the indigenous languages which are still far from being able to accommodate the expression of modern scientific and technological concepts. Ogunsiji (2001), however, notes the negative effects of the roles of English language in Nigeria on the field of education. He argues that at the senior secondary school level, a failure in English language almost amounts to academic failure as no candidate can gain admission to any tertiary institution in Nigeria without a credit pass at the school certificate level. Thus, according to him, some potential geniuses have been reduced to dropouts because of their inability to secure pass grades in the language. Odebunmi (2006), comments that the standard of the English spoken in Nigeria has been traced to the formal way in which English is taught in Nigerian schools. This, according to him, has produced over the years lexical half-backed students who could not differentiate the formal from the informal variety of English. He further states that the general speakers of English in Nigeria, especially the elites go for the bookish variety of English because “such a

use of the language is associated with knowledgeability and learnedness by Nigerians”.

Jowitt (1991), observes that the learning of English in Nigeria start with the learning of simple greetings and the simplest grammatical structures by the primary school pupils. He states further that formal learning continues through primary and secondary school up to General Certificate of education Ordinary Level (GCE ‘O’ level). The learning is continues and supposedly reinforced by ‘Use of English’ courses in higher institutions. It is supported by informal learning outside the classroom. Probably the most important feature is listening to other Nigerians who have achieved proficiency in the English Language.

The learning of other subjects in the curriculum is reinforced by English as it serves as the medium for teaching other subjects apart from subjects like Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo which are taught by using the local languages as the medium of instruction.

FEATURES OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH

Morpho-Syntactic Features

Nigerian English, according to Kperogi (2007), is the variety of English that is broadly spoken and written by Nigeria’s literary, intellectual, political and media elite across the regional and ethnic spectra of Nigeria. The rapid expansion of the vocabulary used by Nigerians to express their thought in English has brought about different

coinages and expressions to suit the situation and context of usage. The inability of the English language to perfectly capture aspects of Nigerian culture has led to importation derived from Nigerian English lexis, culture-specific vocabulary items and creativity to reflect the Nigerian experience. RajiOyelade (2012) observes that Nigerians revel in the re-production of new vocabularies and artificial intelligence which determine how they write, socialize, the way they teach, read and how they recreate.

1. Deviant use of verbs: Stative verbs are verbs that denote perception such as see, hear, look, notice; verbs of cognition such as understand, know, forget, remember, remind, etc and verbs of relations such as belong, are, is, am, equal, resemble, have etc. These verbs do not normally occur in the progressive aspect. But, it is not uncommon to hear Nigerian students make the following utterances:

“I am hearing you” (*can hear*)

“I am seeing from here” (*can see*)

“Please call me back later, I am having a flat battery”.
(*have*)

“I am understanding the lecture” (*can understand*)

2. Indiscriminate use of contracted forms of words: Students, more often than not, use contracted forms of words like ‘u’, ‘ur’, and the ampersand ‘&’ in formal writing instead of the full forms such as ‘you’, ‘your’ and

‘and’. This is a syntactic error that occurs regularly in students’ essays.

3. Non-differentiation of countable and mass nouns:

Here, students affix uncountable nouns with plural markers. Examples of words where this syntactic error are most pronounced are “staffs, stationeries, chawks, cutleries, furnitures, equipments, grasses”. Students use these both in formal and informal situations in their use of English.

4. Misuse of prepositions: This involves using prepositions where they are not required (i.e discuss about, comprise of, emphasize on, order for, vanish away, voice out,etc), substitution of preposition (“congratulate for” instead of “*congratulate on*”, “chat to” instead of “*chat with*”, “leave to Benin”, instead of “*leave for Benin*”, and omission of preposition where they are required (e.g “enable her do it” instead of “*enable her to do it*”, “reply her letter” instead of “*reply to her letter*”, “my sister wrote me” instead of “*my sister wrote to me*”, etc)

5. Ignorance of question tags: Students, most of the time, use wrong question tags in their conversation with friends. For example; “you are not coming to school tomorrow” is supposed to have the question tag “*are you?*” but a student says instead “you are not coming to school tomorrow, will you?” Also, “you have done your assignment, isn’t it? Instead of “*haven’t you?*”

6. Omission of articles where such should be used:

Students in formal and non-formal language situations omit articles (a, an, the) where such should be used. Examples of this include; “make mistake” (*make a mistake*), “take bribe” (*take a bribe*), “deliver lecture” (*deliver a lecture*), “have class” (*have a class*).

7. Deviant use of reflexive pronouns: In Nigerian languages, the distinctions between “themselves”, “ourselves”, “each other” and “one another” are not made. Often, only one lexical item is used to refer to all of them in most Nigerian languages. Hence, students make expressions with them thus:

“Eunice and John love themselves”. (*each other*)

“After greeting ourselves, John, Mary and Joy played football”. (*one another*)

“The other four boys in my project group like helping themselves”. (*one another*).

8. Redundant use of modifiers for emphasis: In

conversations, one could hear a student say;

“This my friend is not serious at all”. Instead of the correct expression

This friend of mine is not serious at all.

“That our lecturer loves women”. Instead of the correct expression

That lecturer of ours loves women.

9. Redundant use of amplifiers: The amplifier or intensifier ‘very’ is used in a redundant manner by students in the polytechnic as seen in the following examples:

The use of computer in banks is very very important.

The class representative is very very wicked.

The course is very very difficult. Etc.

10. Redundant use of adjectives, time and manner adjuncts:

“Prisca likes wearing small small blouses. (Prisca likes wearing *short* blouses)

“Jane, carry that bag sharp sharp. (Jane, carry that bag *quickly*)

“I will be there now now. (I will be there *soon*)

Lexico-Semantic Features

In the area of lexico-semantics, Ogunsiji (2001), notes that new words and expressions are coined to express the Nigeria linguo-cultural realities. According to him, we have expressions such as ‘June 12’ (the date of the annulled 1993 presidential election), ‘four-one-nine’ (high class fraud), ‘presidential strike force’ (security outfits) and others. Jowitt (1991) states that a very large number of words belong to the register of food, dress, transport, religion and traditional customs. The following are some examples:

- a. Akara (Yoruba)- fried cakes made of bean flour;
- b. Buka (Hausa)- a cheap eating place;
- c. Ogbono (Igbo)- name of a soup;

- d. Agbada (Yoruba)- a large gown worn by men; and
- e. Danshiki (Hausa)- gown with wide armpits worn by men.

There are a large number of lexical items and expressions which have undergone semantic change in Nigerian usage compared to British Standard English.

Some examples are highlighted below:

- Academician - used to refer to academic person instead of *academic*.
- Answer (e.g He answers Tope) instead of “His name is Tope”.
- Bush meat - used to refer to the meat of wild animals killed by hunters. (instead of ‘game’).
- Correct - (e.g Your head is not correct). A way of describing someone as a fool.
- Light - meaning electricity (e.g There is no light).
- Shine your eyes - an admonition that someone should be more vigilant.
- Text me - Send me a text message.
- Inbox me- send a message to my mail box.
- Long leg - personal connection with an influential person to obtain favour.
- Next tomorrow – instead of “the day after tomorrow”.

Banjo (1995) draws attention to such locutions as ‘sorry’ and ‘well done’ which are often used as greetings in Nigerian English. The former as an expression of sympathy

(e.g to a person who sneezes) and the latter as a greeting to someone at work. Also, expressions like “the lecturer is not on seat” and “I am coming” are Nigerian English expressions common with students. The former should ideally be, “*The lecturer is presently not available/cannot be reached*”, while the latter should be “*I will be back*”.

Other examples of Nigerian English as used by students are:

Wrong

The student had a *carry over* in GNS 101.

Ufoma *entered the motor* going to Agbor.

She *dropped down* at Agbor.

Off/on the light

The *go slow* was too much.

I want to attend the *congress meeting*.

The car is *overspeeding*.

She delivered a baby girl.

Presently, I am a student.

He was attacked by men *of the underworld*.

The man bought a *Tokunbo car*.

The old man has *joined his ancestors*.

She has four *issues/kids*.

Ade *bagged* a degree in

Right

(The student failed GNS 101.)

(Ufoma boarded a vehicle heading to Agbor.)

(She alighted at Agbor.)

(Switch on/off the light.)

(The traffic jam was too much.)

(I want to attend the congress or meeting.)

(The car is speeding too much.)

(She was delivered of a baby girl.)

(At present, I am a student.)

(He was attacked by armed robbers.)

(The man bought a used car.)

(The old man has died.)

(She has four children.)

(Ade earned a degree in

Engineering.

The policeman *slept* with the woman.

The woman has *taken in* after so many years.

The robbers *deleted* him.

The boy claimed he has *browsed* the girl.

Emeka *toasted* Ifeoma last semester.

The lecturer is not *on seat*.

Engineering.)

(The policeman had sex with the woman.)

(The woman has become pregnant).

(The robbers killed him.)

(The boy claimed that he has had sex with the girl.)

(Emeka tried to date/woo Ifeoma last semester.)

(The lecturer is not available or cannot be reached.)

Recommendation

Given the numerous role English language play in Nigeria, the language should be given priority in its teaching and learning. This will go a long way in enhancing its use in all areas especially in the education system. Good books and other learning materials in the subject should be made available by the government and the syllabus at all levels of the education system should be made functional such that learners will find the subject more interesting. Nigerian teachers of English language should strive to improve on their teaching skills by using methodologies that will enable the students to become competent in the use of the English language. Other measures that can be adopted to improve the use of English language among students are as follows:

- Government at various levels should employ qualified teachers to teach the language. English language should be taught by only qualified graduates of English language.
- Teachers of English language should always strive to update their knowledge of English in terms of its content and methodology in order to impart desirable knowledge to their students because they are the models the students imitate.
- Curriculum planners/designers should focus on the aspect of English that pose problems to learners. English language experts in Nigeria should also endeavour to produce textbooks which address specific problem areas.
- Polytechnic students and other Nigerian learners should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of reading newspapers, textbooks, journals, literary texts, magazines etc written by British and Nigerian authors so as to draw out differences between the two set of authors in terms of their cultural backgrounds and linguistic systems as reflected in their texts. This will enable Nigerian learners see clearly if there is any deviation and then acquaint themselves with native English usages.
- Provision should be made for teachers of English by Nigerian government and heads of educational institutions to attend seminars, workshops and conferences to acquire more knowledge and skills that

will enable them meet up with the challenges and innovations in English language methodology.

- English language should be taught functionally. The students should be engaged in adequate expressive activities both in the written and spoken forms rather than memorization of complicated rules which is characteristic of the grammar translation method. The basis of this novel approach is performance which stresses the appropriate manipulation of language in real life situations.

Conclusion

The fact remains that the various cultural and socio-linguistic thoughts of Nigerians cannot be adequately expressed in the standard form of the English language, hence, the different lexical derivations, innovations and improvisation to suit the situation and context of usage of the English language. Researches are still inconclusive about the characterization of Nigerian English, but it is obvious that there is Nigerian English with its own peculiarities which are conditioned by the Nigerian socio-cultural environment (Ogunsiji 2004). As noted by Kperogi (2007), Nigerian English is not bad or substandard English; it is a legitimate national variety that has evolved out of our experiences as a post-colonial, polyglot nation. It is clear that English has become an important language which cannot be easily discarded in Nigeria. It has become a Nigerian language which has provided another means of

expressing Nigeria's socio-cultural values. Its use in the educational sector will remain as long as there is no alternative to it.

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