

# AN INSIGHT INTO THE GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICO-SEMANTIC FEATURES OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH IN A BILINGUAL SPEECH COMMUNITY.

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## **Abstract**

*English language has attained a dominant status in Nigeria in spite of the country's multilingual context. A mistake is associated with a Native user while Error evolves from the non-native user of the language in terms of usage in Nigeria. This is due to deviation from the norms of Standard English usage as a result of wrong learning which could result in inability to communicate effectively. Error is a non-standard English form that is unacceptable to educated Nigerians. This paper tries to examine the place of English language in Nigeria as well as the ability and intelligibility of English in Nigerian socio-cultural context. It answers questions whether what we call Nigerian English is indeed a concept that should be embraced, and if it is, what are those things that make its acceptance possible. The variety of English used in Nigeria has certain features which distinguish it from other forms of English. These features are manifested at the lexico-semantic, phonological, grammatical and discourse levels. This paper is however limited to the grammatical and lexico-semantic features of Nigerian English only in a bilingual speech community. In what follows, it discusses the evolution of English in Nigeria and goes further to explain the causes of these features in language which are deep rooted in the influence of the Mother tongue on the target language (with appropriate analysis).*

**Keywords:** Error, Nigerian English, semantics, lexis, interference.

## **Introduction**

Language is a symbol or sign of human existence in any situation hence the inevitability of contacts within and outside the system. The concept makes self-expression possible so as to be able to communicate effectively. Language universals however ascribe superiority and other classifications to the phenomenon hence the identification of mother

tongue, first language of contact, second language, foreign language and dialects. The multilingual context of Nigeria therefore gives room for bilinguals in terms of language functions. The dominance of English language on other languages in Nigeria calls for the examination of the result of indigenous contact with it, which will be treated in this paper (though with theoretical base)

### **The Evolution of English in Nigeria**

Nigeria's first contact with the English language dated back to some period before the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is on record that as from 1553, English men paid very brief visits to the Nigerian coasts especially the ports of Benin and Old Calabar and the type of communication which evolved between the English men and Nigerians, was English based pidgin. Later, when slave trafficking increased greatly in the eighteenth century with England as a major exporter of slaves, African traders saw more need to learn European Languages. A few of the sons of these traders were sent to England to learn English, among other things. History has it that these 'students' returned to establish schools for instance, as reported by Adams in Old Calabar to each among other things, the rudiments of English. With the abolition of the slave trade and the need to find an economic alternative, explorers began to penetrate into Nigeria, and beyond at all costs. They were followed by missionaries who played a combined role of preaching the gospel and promoting legitimate trade. The missionaries also built schools, through which came formal education which brought about the spread of English.

At the time, some Nigerians had to be taught English, primarily to help missionaries in the church and also to make them become clerks, interpreters etc. to colonial administrators who came, later, to protect their 'legitimate trade and missionary activities. By 1903, the whole of Nigeria had come effectively under British rule. Government founded its schools alongside those of the missionaries and through formal education, came the spread of English language in Nigeria. Nigerian English, British English, Australian English constitute a major variety of the English language. By Nigeria English, it means the English language as used in Nigeria by the educated. There exists within Nigeria English such sub-varieties as Hausa English, Ijaw English, Igbo English, Efik English, Yoruba English. These are easily identified as ethnic or linguistic groups known as dialectical varieties because they are effected and conditioned by the various dialects of the speakers.

Nigerian English is therefore that variety of English that has developed in Nigerian non-native situation, due to colonial imposition of the language as well as the native English culture on the country. The variety developed is not wholly native English type and not totally Nigeria. It is a blend of the two situations. However, observed usage of the educated Nigerian show among others, the aspects Nigerianisms.

### **The Characteristics of Nigerian English**

The main characteristic of English language in Nigeria is interference. Interference refers to the influence of other languages on English. It can also be seen as the influence of one's first language or Mother tongue on the system of another language or a second

language that one is attempting or using. The influence of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa on the system of the English language in an attempt to use English language. Interference occurs at level of grammar, lexis, semantics, phonology etc. Therefore, the main reason for Nigerian English is attributed to Mother tongue interference and the problems of the acquisition of the language.

### **Grammatical Features of Nigerian English**

One common thing of the grammatical feature of Nigerian English is the omission of function words like article (the) definite or indefinite 'a' 'an'. e.g.

\*I am going to ( ) market

I am going to the market

\*The students gave the police tough time.

-indefinite article 'a' is omitted.

\*He wrote the letter in hurry

He wrote the letter in a hurry.

Another feature is the unusual word order that is a word that is different from American or British English.

#### Yoruba

1. This my friend
2. Colour Blue
3. I and my friend

#### English

- The friend of mine.
- Blue Colour
- My friend and I.

3. The use of reflective pronouns (himself, herself, themselves' ourselves, itself)

\* My father was talking to themselves.

(Here the speaker is trying to express respect).

4. Pluralization of words which are already plural, - These words in standard English singular in form but used in plural form. Yoruba believe(s) denote pluralization therefore they put(s) to mark the plurals. E.g.

- (1) \*Furnitures - Pieces of furniture
- (2) \*Informations - Pieces of information
- (3) \*Equipments - Pieces of equipment
- (4) \*Staffs - Members of staff
- (5) Advice - Pieces of advice
- (6) He's an army - He's a soldier

(No single entity can be an army)

- (7) Misuse of preposition.

Congratulation for (on) your freedom

Do it for (in) your own interest.

(8) Wrong use of affirmative answers to Yes/No questions e.g.

A. You don't eat?

B. Yes, I don't eat.

Instead of No, I don't eat?

(9) There is always the discriminative use of modal auxiliaries. (would, could, can) etc.

(10) Use of they

e.g. They are calling you

instead of you are called.

The they at the beginning comes out of the plurality for respect in Yoruba which is not applicable in English, except if the callers are many.

(11) Adjectives formed from verbs tend to retain their participle form e.g.

B.E.

N.E.

An advance copy

an advanced copy

of the petition.

of the petition

we had roast

we had roasted

chicken for lunch

chicken for lunch.

(12) Use of other adjectives: or adverb to qualify adjectives that are beyond comparison e.g. wonderful, horrible, marvelous. etc.

B.E.

N.E.

I wish you best of luck.

I wish you every best of luck.

A unique occasion.

A very unique occasion.

### **Lexico – Semantic Features in Nigerian English**

These Lexico-semantic variation shall be considered through its causes, types and implications of such variations.

Adegbija (1989) identified six main causes of Lexico-semantic variation as follows:

1. *Socio-cultural differences between the English and Nigerian people.*
2. *Pragmatic aspects of the dynamics of a multilingual context.*
3. *The exigencies of differing discourse constraints.*
4. *The indomitable pervasive and omnipresent influence of the media*
5. *The standardization of idiosyncrasies and errors.*
6. *The predominantly formal character of the English taught in Nigeria.*

(1) Socio-cultural differences between cultures, represented by English and Nigerian people.

Culture is believed to have a link with custom, therefore there are bound to be differences between the native English users and the Nigerians and this resolve to growth of new lexical items. For instance, marriage customs in Nigeria are quite different from those in England or in America. Since the introduction of English to Nigeria, there had been new lexico-semantic denotations and collocations in English.

1. Bush meat: any edible animal caught from the bush (game).
2. Bride price: The items paid to a bride's family by the groom's family before a marriage can be contracted.
3. Social. Wake keeping – staying awake for sometimes during or throughout the night in honour of dead person.

These words (above) are found in Nigerian culture and experiences: for such items, English has no equivalent: if such exist, they are rather unsuitable for expressing peculiarly Nigerian ways of life.

Some words have been given new meaning – to keep them in ways of the indigenous languages.

Examples

Wife: A woman to whom a man is married

(b) a woman married to a man in a particular family: culturally, she is a wife to both the males and the females in the family.

Uncle; (a) brother of one's father or mother.

(b)The husband of one's aunt.

(c) A man whose brother or sister has a child.

(d) Iractically any familiar elder too old to be called brother'.

(2) The dynamic of the pragmatics of a multilingual context:

This has to do with the pragmatic consequences of the presence of many languages in a particular context involving Lexical borrowing, language mixing, code-switching as observed by Jowitt (1991) and Trudgill (1983). The new Lexical items are traced to the language contact. Direct translation is likely to result with the introduction of English to the mother tongue. Examples of direction translation include:

Igbo Language: Kedu? O di mma.

Nigerian English: How? Not bad.

Yoruba: Nigerian English

Gbooorun 'hear a smell'

Here, 'Here a smell' can be seen as an instance of semantic under differentiation.

Examples also abound of many Nigerian foods that have borrowed into Nigerian English usage

Eba: a kind of food made from cassava flour or gari.

Tuwo: a kind of food made mostly from rice or millet.

(3) The exigencies of differing discourse constraints.

A number of Lexico-semantic variations of Nigerian English from native English are patterned on the idea of the Nigerian indigenous languages for engaging in discourse. It is noted that Nigerian speakers of English tend to confer respect on someone during discourse.

Therefore we can have expression like

NE: My senior brother has just left for Lagos instead of

My elder brother has just left for Lagos.

Other features of discourse include the excessive use of 'sir' for males and 'ma' for females in greetings. There is also the use of indirectness as an important verbal discourse strategy to avoid offensive or indirect discussion. For instance, it is not right to announce bluntly that a king or chief is dead. The proper utterance is to join one's ancestors.

Other Nigerian English idioms which have created indirect reference are

Direct	Indirect/N.E.
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To become	to take in
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Pregnant	
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To deliver a baby	to put to bed
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(4) The indomitable pervasive and omnipresent influence.

The media has also helped to create new words, a number of Lexico-semantic variations of Nigerian English are noted in newspapers, magazines, sport journals, radio and television which relate how speaker of English use them in the country.

National Cake: rights, privileges, items to be shared by States or citizens of Nigeria.

Bottom power: favour obtained by a woman through the use of feminine charm or the granting of sexual favours (Adetuyi 2009).

(5) The standardization of idiosyncracies and errors.

There are some errors in English spoken by Nigerians which has come to stay and has been regarded as a standard for others to follow. Examples include.

A man of timber and caliber

(a very important and influential personality).

Another example is troubled shooter, which in Nigerian English refers to one who foments trouble but in native English context, is one who quells trouble.

(6) The predominantly formal character of the English taught in Nigeria.

Nigerian English speakers have a tendency to make use of “big words” or “few breaking word” since it is a mark of identifying a learned people or one who possesses knowledge, Apart from that, the Nigerian English is bookish in nature and this has to do with the mode of acquisition of the language in Nigeria.

Example of “jaw breaking word is

Conditionalites – conditions

### **Types of Lexico-Semantic Variation in Nigerian English.**

The major classes of lexico-semantic variation identified are as follows.

- A. Transfer
- B. Analogy
- C. Acronyms
- D. Semantic shift or extension
- E. Coinages or neologisms.

### **Transfer**

The following transfers are possible as identified by Adetuyi (2011). Transfer of meaning, transfer of culture, transfer of context and transfer of Nigerian pidgin features.

Transfer of meaning relates to situation in which a meaning foreign to English but present in the mother tongue is directly translated into English.

Mother tongue	Nigerian English	gloss
Eraniḡbe	bush meat	an edible animal caught in the bush
Araoko person.	bush girl/bush man	uncivil, unsophisticated, naive

Others which have English equivalent are often times translated wrongly

Examples

Mother tongue	Nigerian English	Native equivalent
Ya	branch	stop over.
Mo n bo	I am coming	excuse me, I'll soon be back.

A common meaning between different languages may have different contexts of occurrences. Such contexts are occasionally transferred in a situation of language contact. For instance in a context where one is not responsible for another person's mishap, we still find Nigerians greeting as when that individual assumes responsibility for another person's mishap. The indigenous context has been transferred to English so that many Nigerians say 'sorry to someone even when they do not wish to imply that they are responsible for the mishap that has occurred.

The close contact between pidgin English and the English language in Nigeria makes the transference of lexical items from one language to another possible example.

N.E	N.E
Dash	give
Long throat	greed
Mammy wagon	lorry

### **(2) Analogy**

This has to do with the formation of new words on the basis of partial likeness or agreement in form with already existing words, either in the mother tongue or in English. The newly – formed item could be entirely English or could be a combination of English and the mother tongue.

Mother tongue	Nigerian English.
Azikiwe (a person's name)	Zikism
Awo (a person's name)	Awoism

Most non-pluralizable mass nouns such as equipment, information etc. are pluralizable in Nigerian English by analogy with English regular patterns of pluralization involving the simple procedure of the addition of –s suffix to noun to form their native English context. Lexical items like arrangee, invitee, counselee etc. are very common in Nigerian English.

### **(3) Acronyms:**

This refers to formation of new lexical items by the use of the initial letters or larger portions of existing words.

1. JAMB: Joint Admission and Matriculation Board.
2. NITEL: Nigerian Telecommunication Limited.
3. NEPA: Nigerian Electric Power Authority.
4. ASUU: Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities.
5. WAI: War Against Indiscipline.

### **(4) Semantic shift or extension:**

Some lexical item in native English have had their semantic range restricted, shifted, or extended in Nigerian English. A few word retain their old meanings no longer current in native English contexts. It is noted that the dictionary meanings of these word differs from the Nigerian English usage. Example.

Chase: To go after a woman with the intention of winning her love.

Dress: To move at the end of a row to create space for other persons.

Escort: To see a guest off.

Garage: A bus station or motor park.

Masquerade: suggests festivity or religion associated with reincarnation.

### **(5) Coinages or neologisms**

This deals with the creation or invention of lexical items with nativized meanings. Coinages were brought about to make room for new experiences, feelings, thoughts, patterns culture and customs, etc.

The three main bases according to Adegbija can be recognized for lexical innovation. These are

- a. The existing lexical stock in English.
- b. The existing lexical stock in the Mother tongue.
- c. A hybrid of the lexical stock of English and indigenous languages.

(a) The existing lexical stock in English

These words came to being as a result of existing English words.

Examples:

- i. Half-current: when the electric current is not full because of low voltage and the lights are not very bright.
- ii. Yellow-Fever: Traffic wardens in Nigeria – who normally wear yellowish attire.
- iii. Khaki boys: a derogatory name for soldiers or, at times, for uniformed men in general.

(b) The existing lexical stock in the Mother tongue.

Agbada: a Yoruba name for a kind of gown in many parts of Nigeria.

Tuwo: a kind of food usually made from corn or rice.

(c) A hybrid of the lexical stock of indigenous languages and English.

Akara balls: a synonym of bean cake

Bukateria: a blend of Yoruba buka (a place where food is sold, usually cheaply) and -teria (an invented English suffix).

Other examples of lexical and idiomatic coinages are the following:

1. Portable: Slender, small body (usually used for ladies).
2. Public dog: a woman who is a flirt or who is excessively promiscuous.
3. Been-to: anyone who has travelled overseas.
4. Carry over- the repeating of a course done and failed in a subsequent year.
5. Face-to-face: a set of flats or apartment built directly opposite or facing each other.

These words have been able to express the Nigerian mentality, psyche and experience than any native English gloss. What has happened to the above English words is that they have been reshaped to convey a new menacing and new social, cultural and linguistic ideas.

In the Nigerian context, each of the indigenous languages borrowed from one another, e.g. the words wahala and seria are borrowed from Hausa into Yoruba. In terms of the English language, several English words have been borrowed into, for instance, the Yoruba language – this is more pronounced in certain occupations which are foreign to the Yoruba but which, however, have been indigenized, e.g. Mekaniiki, Dokita, riwaya, sukuru, fidio, redio, etc.

Adegbija (1987:59), Adekunle (1974) and Obiechina (1974) observed that most non-Nigerians will find it difficult to understand the variants of deviations in English language Use by Nigerians, which are regarded as interference and some scholars attributed them to “creativity.

### **Conclusions And Implications**

The lexico-semantic variations in Nigerian English has reduced international intelligibility, though these innovations give English in Nigeria a good status, but non-Nigerians will find it difficult to understand such variations.

Participant in an interactional exchange in an English as second language environment may always need to make greater allowances for unintended speech acts than in a first language context. In a second language context, there is a need for an extra-sensitivity to the context in which communication occurs, for such a context could hold the key to the genuine, bona-fide functions of utterances.

This is because differences could occasionally lead to misinterpretations of the communication functions of utterances.

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