

The Intonation of Nigerian English

Bassey A. Okon

Introduction

The English language was introduced into many countries through colonization among other factors (Oyeleye 1991). Countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, India and Sri Lanka use it as a means of communication nationally as well as internationally. Within these geographical entities, the English language acts as the medium of instruction in schools, from the primary school up to the tertiary. The introduction and use of English as the language of instruction as well as communication has influenced the language situation in Nigeria.

With the introduction of the English language into Nigeria, the emphasis has always been on the ability to use the language correctly (Sic). For as Omolewa (1975) states:

The medium of instruction will be English, and in all subjects teachers must be careful to insist on the CORRECT use of the language, SPOKEN and written.

From this excerpt, it is evident that the English language enjoys a privileged position in Nigeria. This observation buttresses Bamgbose's (1991) assertion that:

Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language.

In Nigeria, there are about four hundred and thirty six languages (Crozier and Blench, 1992:4). Therefore, with the arrival of English into this plurality of linguistic environment, there is bound to be a process of adaptation. This process of adaptation is bipolar. That is, the English language will influence the indigenous languages equally as the indigenous languages will influence the English language. The result of this influence is bound to have some effect on the variety of English spoken in Nigeria. The focus of this paper is on the intonational pattern of English spoken in Nigeria which is different from that spoken by the native speakers and in other countries where English is spoken. That is to say, that the spoken aspect of English in Nigeria has not shown any remarkable affinity or resemblance to the spoken English of the native speakers in terms of non-segmental features (Okon 2000:8). This peculiarity is not found only in spoken Nigerian English but it is also a common feature where English is used as a second language.

Objective of this study

To determine the nature of intonation in spoken Nigerian English.

Instrument

Reading texts were given to the subjects and these were recorded on tape. This type of instrument which consisted of twenty two sentences was used to test performance on intonation of spoken English. The reading texts were designed as guided by related literature (Gimson 1975, 1990).

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been applied in the study of the non-segmental features of English; for example, the generative theory of Chomsky and Halle (1968), the prosodic theory of Firth (1970), the metrical theory of Selkirk (1980) and the autosegmental theory of Goldsmith (1976, 1990 and 1995). This article will apply the metrical theory in its analysis.

Metrical theory is concerned with the interpretation of English metre. It centres on the nature of RHYTHM that focuses on quantity in relation to sequences of long and short syllables. Metrical theory deals with phonological hierarchies, namely the organisation of segments into syllables, syllables into feet and into other higher levels. Furthermore, Udoh (1998:63) asserts that metrical theory concerns itself with the hierarchical relations of segments to each other as it uses "tunes" to represent the pitch shape, the prominence pattern and the contour of an utterance.

Metricality is typically gradient and the primary goal of metrics is to discover the rules that govern the metricality and

complexity of verse in the metrical traditions. Metrical theory uses both the metrical tree and the metrical grid. These formal ways show the patterns of prominence and also represent the hierarchical arrangement in syllables. They mark the prominence between primary and secondary stress to show the patterns of words and the higher ranks. The metrical tree and metrical grid, though they have different systems of representation, have a common goal: the application of rules in the study of suprasegmental features. Some of the goals of the metrical theory are summarized as follows:

- (a) That the study of stress is different from the study of other phonological characteristics.
 - (b) That stress representations are hierarchical.
- Goldsmith 1990 in Udoh 1998: 64.

However, the relative prominence which shows where the main stress falls is represented by the 's' and 'w'.

As already observed, two formalisms, viz: the metrical tree and the metrical grid, are used in metrical theory. The application of the metrical grid is marked by the symbol 'x'. It is through the use of the symbol 'x' that the weights and beats of utterances are shown. The use of the metrical grid fits the structure of a rhythmic hierarchy level with different "metrical levels"

There are two levels of representation. The vertical level shows the strength of the beat in the rhythm of the phrase. The prominent beats have more 'Xs'. Apart from the vertical axis, the horizontal axis is numbered 3 – 1 and shows the beat. The underlying rhythmic structure of timing in the beats in the multilayered metrical tree is represented through the use of the metrical grid (Couper – Kuhlen 1986).

As a theory, metrical postulation has its merits and demerits. It aids the understanding of how rhythmic factors contribute to lexical and sentential stress. The metrical theory is useful as it provides rule domains. In spite of its merits, the metrical system still has its demerits: there is considerable debate over the specifics of this theory and how to express them formally (Hayes 1988: 249).

Application of the Metrical Theory

The metrical theory shows the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables to form a rhythmical pattern. The foot is a subdivision of a metrical line and may be used to identify different types of metrical structure (Hartmann & Stork 1972). For this analysis, the metrical theory shows a combination of a stressed syllable and an unstressed syllable which are arranged hierarchically and represented in the grid. We wish to reiterate that the metrical structure comprises domains in rows that start with 0 on line 1 is the stress row. Each stress domain has a rhythmic position which is more prominent than others. The representation involves sequences of constituents known as

the head which controls the domain. The overall stressed syllable is indicated by more 'xs' on all three levels. The top layer is the word row. The syllable that receives an 'x' in the third row bears the main stress. The degree of stress is represented by the height of the columns (Udoh 1998 : 156).

The metrical grid is a formal means of representing stress in a language. It is a set of three (3) layers that run parallel to the string of syllables that make up the word. The lowest layer contains a series of 'x'. This row is usually called row 0, but it is frequently called the syllable row (Goldsmith 1990:190). The next layer up represents the secondary stress and has an 'x' only above those syllables that are stressed. It marks the head of feet and it is called the first row or row 1. The next row known as word row or row 2 has an 'x' that appears only above the syllable that receives the main stress of the word. Each syllable is assigned a position in the metrical grid. This is the bottom level (L1) of the grid.

In order to reflect the relative strength of those syllables in the grid, there is a second level (L2). The strong (terminally 's') syllables are defined as having more metrical strength than the 'weak' (terminally 'w') syllables. The principle of strong is stronger than weak gets a grid mark on (L3). The strongest stress of the phrase is uniquely and solely dominated by 's' and this relative strength is marked as the solitary topmost 'x' in the grid (Hogg, & McCully 1987 : 131). For this work, the rows are numbered 1 – 3. The height of the columns shows the degree of stress prominence placed on each syllable. This article makes use

of the grid formula which allows for clear evaluation of the representations. In this case, hierarchically, the model shows how the strong and weak syllables are represented. These representations of strong and weak syllables allow for the peculiar rhythmic pattern in the English Language.

The intonation of Nigerian speakers of English is analysed using the metrical grid because it shows both the beats and the internal structure of the syllables. Using two British speakers as samples on the performance in English intonation, we discovered that the patterns produced by the Nigerian speakers of English vary from the British patterns in all its ramifications. As already stated, some Nigerians read sentences to ascertain the intonation pattern of spoken Nigerian English (SNE). The analysis is illustrated below:

A Metrical Analysis of English Data Recording of Spoken British English (SBE) and Spoken Nigerian English (SNE)

Sentence 1

BE SPEAKER

3		X		
2	X	X		X
1	X	X	X	X
	He's	J	a	p
		a	n	e
		s	e	e

ED SPEAKER

3

X

2

XX

X X

1

XX

X X X

He's

Japanese

HA SPEAKER

3

X

2

XX

X X

1

XX

X X X

He's

Japanese

IB SPEAKER

3

X

2

XX

X X

1

XX

X X X

He's

Japanese

IG SPEAKER

3

X

2

XX

X X

1

XX

X X X

He's

Japanese

TV SPEAKER

3

X

2

XX

X X

1

XX

X X X

He's

Japanese

YO SPEAKER

3					X
2		XX			X X
1		XX			X X X
		He's			Japanese

SENTENCE 4

BE SPEAKER

3						X
2	X			XX		X
1	X	X		XX X		X X
	He's	a		Japanese		Doctor

ED SPEAKER

3				X		X
2		XX X		X X		X X
1		XX X		X X X		X X
	He's	a		Japanese		Doctor

HA SPEAKER

3				X		X
2		XX		X X		X X
1		XX X		X X X		X X
	He's	a		Japanese		Doctor

IB SPEAKER

3		X		X
2	XX	X	X	X X
1	XX X	X X X	X	X

He's a Japanese Doctor

IG SPEAKER

3		X		X
2	XX	X X	X	X
1	XX X	X X X	X	X

He's a Japanese Doctor

TV SPEAKER

3		X		X
2	XX	X X	X	X
1	XX X	X X X	X	X

He's a Japanese Doctor

YO SPEAKER

3		X		X
2	XX	X X	X	X
1	XX X	X X X	X	X

He's a Japanese Doctor

Discussion of Analysis

A look at the analysis which applies the metrical grid formula shows a marked variation exists in the intonation pattern of Nigerian speakers of the English language. The variation is represented in the occurrence of two strong syllables preceding each other. This pattern does not exist in the intonation of British English. The reason is that the occurrence of two strong syllables adjacent each other results in a stress clash and the stress rule does not allow for such a phenomenon – stress clash. The unique rhythmic melody of the English language is not observed in the intonation of most Nigerian speakers of English. The stress clash is observed in sentence 1 where two strong stressed syllables occur on “Japanese”, whereas for the British speaker, the strong syllable is on “JA” which is the stressed syllable.

For sentence 4, where the native speaker shows a secondary degree of stress for Ja, and a primary degree of stress on ‘DO’, the Nigerian speaker of English has two levels of primary stress for those syllables. Another set of examples will serve to buttress this point.

SENTENCE 8

BE SPEAKER

3							X		
2	X	X		X	X		X		X
1	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/	are		we	having	/	for	lunch	/mother? /

ED SPEAKER

3					X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
1	X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/are		we having	/ for lunch		/mother?/

HA SPEAKER

3					X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
1	X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/are		we having	/ for lunch		/mother? /

IB SPEAKER

3					X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
1	X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/are		we having	/ for lunch		/mother? /

IG SPEAKER

3					X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
1	X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/are		we having	/ for lunch		/mother?/

TV SPEAKER

3					X	
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
1	X	X	X	X	X	X
	What/are		we having	/ for lunch		/mother?/

YO SPEAKER

3						X		
2	X	X		X	X	X		X X
1	X	X		X	X	X	X	X X

What/are we having / for lunch/mother? /

SENTENCE 15 BE SPEAKER

3								X
2	X			X	X			X
	X	X						
1	X	X		X	X	X	X	X X

What/are we having / for lunch/mother? /

ED SPEAKER

3						X		X X
2	X	X		X	X	X		X X
1	X	X		X	X	X		X X

What/are we having / for lunch /mother?/

HA SPEAKER

3						X		X
2	X	X		X	X	X		X X
1	X	X		X	X	X		X X

What/are we having / for lunch /mother? /

IB SPEAKER

3 X X
2 X X X X X
1 X X X X X X
What/are we having /for lunch /mother?/

IG SPEAKER

3 X X
2 X X X X X
1 X X X X X X
What/are we having /for lunch /mother?/

TV SPEAKER

3 X X
2 X X X X X
1 X X X X X X
What/are we having /for lunch /mother? /

YO SPEAKER

3 X X
2 X X X X X
1 X X X X X X
What/are we having /for lunch /mother? /

Discussion of Analysis

From our analysis we observe as follows:

Whereas spoken British English exhibits the regular 'sw' and 'sww' patterns as the normal feet, spoken Nigerian English has the following: 'sww', 'ssw' and 'ss' as the patterns that occur in the normal feet. We concluded that the intonational pattern of spoken Nigerian English distinguishes itself from that of spoken British English. As Okon (2002 : 37) asserts, English is a second language in Nigeria and is learnt in the classroom: In addition the models for spoken Nigerian English are Nigerians, therefore, there is bound to be little or no difference in the intonation of the subjects (Okon 2002: 39).

Spoken British English is described as stressed – timed but spoken Nigerian English exhibits its own peculiar timing which we attribute to the effect of the tone patterns of the indigenous languages. Works by Okon 2000, Udofot 1997, and Ufomata 1995 support this assertion. The syllables in spoken Nigerian English are produced in a steady flow which result in what Crystal (1987) describes as a machine-gun effect.

We wish to posit that division of utterance into feet is considered as a grammatical issue since syntactic or grammatical phrasing may constrain intonation (Pierrehumbert 1992: 227). Also stress patterns are considered to reflect, at least in part, relations of prominence between syntactic and morphological constituents. Therefore, using sentence samples '8' and '15' confirm a

variation from the native speaker's intonation. Sentences '8' and '15' confirm a variation from the native. Speaker's intonation. Sentences '8' and '15' are basically and syntactically the same but the difference is found in the intonation pattern. Sentences '8' and '15' could be described as ambiguous sentences which are capable of more than one meaning. Apparently, it is capable of showing different intentions. Sentence '8' questions mother about lunch while question '15' wants to know if it is mother for lunch. The difference is made on the last word – mother – for sentence '8' it is a falling tone whereas sentence '15' exhibits a rising tone.

From the analysis done, the Nigerian speakers of English have not made any distinction in the tune of the two words. The words are produced the same way by the Nigerian speaker of English. That is, both sentences end with the low tone, that is falling tune, and therefore does not reflect the difference in meaning. The explanation is that some Nigerian languages do not ordinarily make a distinction between a 'yes-no' question and a statement intonationally (Essien 1990). This implies that the Nigerian speaker of English does not distinguish the meanings of the two utterances and therefore, the pitch pattern is transferred into English. This confirms Amayo's (1980) observation that English stress patterns are converted to tone patterns. Furthermore, the Nigerian speaker of English does not apply the Alternation rule which does not allow the occurrence of

two strong syllables adjacent to each other. This is in agreement with Udoh (1998 : 251 – 252) deductions that

The speech of the Annang learners
[of English] were characterized by a
proliferation of syllables, which led to
wide spread occurrence of adjacent
stressed syllables
leading to stress clashes

We would like to see this phenomenon of occurrence of adjacent stressed syllables in spoken Nigerian English as a variation which differentiates spoken Nigerian English (SNE) from spoken British English (SBE).

Conclusion

Applying the metrical theory to analyse spoken Nigerian English, it has been observed that the intonation of spoken Nigerian English varies from the intonation of spoken British English. As already observed in an earlier work (Okon 2002 : 39), there is bound to be a variation in the two Englishes because spoken Nigerian English is situated within the Nigerian speech community. Based on the foregoing, the linguistic and socio-cultural elements play important roles in the speech of Nigerian speakers of English.

Key:

SBE	Spoken British English
SNE	Spoken Nigerian English
BE	British English Speaker
ED	Edo Speaker of English
HA	Hausa Speaker of English
IB	Ibibio Speaker of English
IG	Igbo Speaker of English
TV	Tiv Speaker of English
YO	Yoruba Speaker of English

Works Cited

- Amayo, M. A. (1980), "Tone in Nigerian English" In J. Kreiman & A. Ojeida (eds) *Papers from the Sixteenth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago: 1-9
- Bamgbose, A. (1971) "The English Language in Nigeria", in J. Spencer (ed.) *The English Language in West Africa*. London: Longman Ltd. 35-48
- Couper – Kuhlen, E. (1986). *An Introduction to English Prosody*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Crozier, D. H & R. M. Blench (ed) (1992) *Index of Nigerian Languages*. 2nd ed. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics
- Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Essien, O. E. A. (1990) *A Grammar of Ibibio Language*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Gimson, A. C. (1975) *A Practical Course of English Pronunciation: A Perceptual Approach*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Gimson, A. C. (1990) *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*. 4th ed. London: Edward Arnold
- Goldsmith, J. A. (1990) *Autosegmental and Metrical Phonology*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- Goldsmith, J. A. (ed) (1995) *Handbook of Phonological Theory*: Massachusetts: Blackwell.

- Hayes, B. (1988) Metrics and Phonological Theory" In : F. J. Newmeyer (ed) *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey Vol. 2 Linguistic Theory: Extensions and Implication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. 221-249
- Hartmann, R. R. K. & F. C. Stork. (1972) *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*: London: Applied Science Publishers.
- Hogg, R. M. & C. B. McCully (1987). *Metrical Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Okon, B. A (2000) "*The Intonational Structure of Nigerian English*". An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Ibadan.
- Okon, B. A. (2002) "Communicative Competence and Intonation among Nigerian Speakers of English" *West African Journal of Educational Research* 5/1: 34 – 40.
- Omolewa, M. (1975) "The English Language in Colonial Nigeria, 1862 – 1960: A study of the Major Factors which promoted the Language. *Journal of Nigeria English Studies*. 7/1 & 2 : 103 – 117
- Oyeleye, L. (1991) "Nigerian English: A Re-examination of some Historical and Sociolinguistic Factors. *African Notes* Special Edition on Linguistics.
- Pierrehumbert, J. B. (1992) "Intonation" In W. Bright. (ed) *Encyclopedia of Linguistics* Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Udoh, I. I. (1998) "*The Effect of Duration on the Intonation of Ananng Learners of English*". An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Calabar.

- Hayes, B. (1988) Metrics and Phonological Theory" In : F. J. Newmeyer (ed) *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey Vol. 2 Linguistic Theory: Extensions and Implication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. 221-249
- Hartmann, R. R. K. & F. C. Stork. (1972) *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*: London: Applied Science Publishers.
- Hogg, R. M. & C. B. McCully (1987). *Metrical Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Okon, B. A (2000) "*The Intonational Structure of Nigerian English*". An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Ibadan.
- Okon, B. A. (2002) "Communicative Competence and Intonation among Nigerian Speakers of English" *West African Journal of Educational Research* 5/1: 34 – 40.
- Omolewa, M. (1975) "The English Language in Colonial Nigeria, 1862 – 1960: A study of the Major Factors which promoted the Language. "*Journal of Nigeria English Studies*. 7/1 & 2 : 103 – 117
- Oyeleye, L. (1991) "Nigerian English: A Re-examination of some Historical and Sociolinguistic Factors. *African Notes* Special Edition on Linguistics.
- Pierrehumbert, J. B. (1992) "Intonation" In W. Bright. (ed) *Encyclopedia of Linguistics* Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Udoh, I. I. (1998) "*The Effect of Duration on the Intonation of Ananng Learners of English*". An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Calabar.