

# **Language and Literature in a Changing Society**

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**Selected Papers from the Proceedings  
of The XIVTH Annual Conference  
of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria (LAN)**

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*Edited by*

**A. U. Iwara**

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## **The Changing Patterns of Accentuation in Nigerian English**

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*David Eka*

### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1 The Problem*

Two major problems have generally been recognized in relation to the pronunciation of English, particularly the pronunciation of English as a Second, as a foreign or as an alternate language.<sup>1</sup> These problems are those of the segments and those of the nonsegments.

Segmental problems may arise because a speaker may be heard to say *Noss, let, pat* for instance, when in fact his target was *nurse, late, part*. It is clear from the above that this confusion will have arisen from the replacement of

/ɜ:/ by /ɒ/, /eɪ/ by /e/ and

/a:/ by /æ/:

(1) nurse/noss;

(2) late/let;

(3) part/pat.

The segmental problems can also be traced to the tyranny of the sounds of the speaker's first language, to specific intralingual issues or other matters explicable in terms of inadequate learning/mastery.

With regard to words in association with each other, the confusion can be enormous. For instance inappropriate choice of sound

segments can lead the listener to wonder whether the speaker intended to say:

1(a) *A Nurse works in the hospital*

or

\*1(b) *A Noss works in the hospital.*

2(a) *I came in late from school.*

or

\*2(b) *I came in let from school.*

3(a) *John took part in the discussion*

or

\*3(b) *John took pat in the discussion.*

In spite of the above realities, however, one tends to feel easily convinced that given appropriate experience in a speech community (like the Nigerian speech community), one can easily understand what the speaker intended to say particularly in respect of words in isolation. Equally, one can easily arrive at what the speaker intended to say by studying the context of utterance in the case of words in association.

With regard to nonsegmental features, problems of accentuation (and related matters), intonation and rhythm are easily noticeable. As can be seen from a phonological analysis, an unacceptable accentuation can change radically the shape of given words; colourless intonation can prevent vital meanings of utterances while an unusual rhythm can cause the listener to wonder whether it is English or some other language that is spoken! Since all the above are important, it is necessary to justify our choice of topic for investigation.

### 1.2 Justification for the Study

This study was prompted by four major reasons. First, accentual positions in English words are normally fixed, and it is important, for practical communication purposes, to survey the extent to which

speakers of Nigerian English keep to the accentual patterns or depart from them. As our business is legitimately that of describing observed/studied performance, the study will enable us to characterize, in specific terms, accentual patterning across and within the varieties of Nigerian English and hence to ascertain the relationship between Nigerian English and other varieties such as British English.

Secondly, it is commonly known that nonsegmental features are relatively more important than segmental features when we are concerned with intelligible speech. As Allen (1978:xii) observes:

Broadly speaking, a reasonably correct speech - flow is more important for intelligibility than correct sounds. It is possible to carry on an intelligible English conversation in a series of numbles and grunts, provided the voice movement is correct.<sup>2</sup>

Since accentuation is a very important nonsegmental feature, it deserves a specific study as a contribution to the description of the melody of Nigerian English.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the specification of syllable juncture (or disjuncture in English, cf. Sommerstein 1977:40), is certainly more difficult than many analysts are ready to accept. This study intends to make a contribution also in this regard and thus additionally complement the information in Kujore (1985).

Finally, this study aims at providing at least some parts of the answers to the following questions:

- (i) To what extent is accentuation in the English spoken by Nigerians variable?
- (ii) To what extent do the varied accentual patterns represent specific varieties of Nigerian English, and how far are they simply random variants?
- (iii) How important are the variations in determining educated usage in Nigerian English?
- (iv) What, incidentally, are the pedagogical dimensions of this study?

### 1.3 Accent, Accentuation and Stress: Isolation/Links

The term *accent* is generally used to describe varieties of pronunciation in a particular language (Lyons 1990:268-269). We can therefore talk about a British, American, Canadian, Ghanaian or Nigerian accent of English. A description of the features of a given accent is concerned exclusively with pronunciation and has hardly anything to do with grammar or vocabulary aspects which would be essential in the description of a language variety that goes by the name *dialect* (or idiom).

*Accentuation* on the other hand is a phonological term that has generally tended to be reserved for a description of the totality of energy needed and actually used for the realization of a syllable. As Gimson (1975:33-34) rightly puts it, accentuation is a composite term, for when a syllable is accented, it is "made more prominent than its neighbours by means of any or all of four factors: stress, pitch, quality and quantity". We can therefore say that stress, pitch, quality and quantity constitute the major components of accentuation.

Stress as noted above, is meant to be part of accentuation and may be distinguished from the other components in being "loudness for the listener" (Gimson 1975:33). Bolinger (1958, 1961) holds views similar to that stated here. According to these sources, stress is perceived prominence.

The above explications of the terms accent, accentuation and stress are straightforward and admit of little or no confusion. From them we see the enormously general nature of *accent*, the compact but well defined features of *accentuation* and the restricted phonetic nature of *stress*. This is not to suggest that there is nothing that unites the three terms. Indeed, they are all terms in pronunciation of nonsegmental features.

However, it is important to note that there are sources which see the terms as largely alternative ones in the pronunciation of the utterances of a given language. Clark and Yallop (1990:287) accepts that stress is "perceived relative loudness" but goes on to say that stress is also sometimes used in a loose sense to refer to either prominence in a general way or to emphasis placed on syllables. Sommerstein (1977), while accepting the phonetic quality/nature of stress considers pitch and duration as being more important for the overall accentual patterning.

Our purpose in explaining these terms is primarily to indicate unambiguously our direction of analysis, namely that the components of accentuation shown above are freely used. Besides our intention is to show that it is quite easy to isolate the terms when such a separation becomes important, and also to link them up depending on the goals of our description.

### 1.4 Varieties of Nigerian English Revisited

Varieties of Nigerian English may be isolated along ethnolinguistic lines, along the levels of general (formal) education or along the lines of specific education, when that means education in the English language. Ethnolinguistic variation tends to be unwieldy and sometimes impressionistic, since there are numerous ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria — at least 513, according to Bamgbose (1978:65). Besides, many Nigerian speakers of English tend to outgrow the tyranny of the mother tongue as they gain more experience in their speech and exposure. So while it is inescapable that at the early stages of learning the English language speakers tend to show evident traces of their L<sub>1</sub>, such traces become insignificant as the learners gain maturity. They tend to become united by adherence to standards of educated usage everywhere.

Varieties isolated from the viewpoint of level of formal education are perhaps comparatively more dependable, though they are not without problems. As reported in Jibril (1982), speakers who are not within accomplished levels of formal education sometimes achieve higher levels of national and international intelligibility in their speech performance than the accomplished ones. So, classification along the lines of formal education is often unreliable.

Classification along the lines of specific education - education in the English language as our data can show, is apparently more reliable. This is the approach we have adopted in this study. Thus, we have arrived at three varieties in our assessment of accentual patterning: those who approximate the standards of L<sub>1</sub> speakers and educated nonnative users, those who show a general tendency towards departure from educated and L<sub>1</sub> standards and those who demonstrate a complete and consistent departure in every marked instance from the performance of educated users. The first group constitutes the Educated Variety; the

second group the General Variety and the third group the Innovative Variety.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The Data

Data for this study were collected from 120 students of the University of Uyo. This population represented 11 Language/cluster groups: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Annang, Oron, Ekid, Mbe (also called Mbube), Bette, Yakurr. A further breakdown showed 40 informants from nondegree programmes, 40 from undergraduates (other than those in the final year) i.e. year one to the penultimate year, and 40 from final year classes. A major variable was the informant's discipline: we recorded those in the Remedial Programme, Diploma in Theatre Arts, NCE; English, Linguistics, Communication Arts, History, Law and Natural and Applied Sciences.

All the informants carried out identical sets of tasks: reading three sets of English utterances: two sets of wordlists and a set of utterances of group or clause status.

The first set of wordlists consisted of those words which, from our experience, are not often difficult for Nigerian learners to place accentuation on. Such words include:

income,	bookish
refill,	mobile
future,	teacher
enchanted,	encamp.

There were altogether 40 words in this set.

The second set consisted of words which, from our experience, are often difficult for Nigerian learners of English. The words in this group include:

Madam,	Janet
David,	biscuit
humanistic,	brochure
congratulations,	negotiate
accusation,	convocation
July,	introduction
August, (month)	

august, (great/important)	
distribute,	graduate (verb)
Elsie,	apostolic
appreciated,	dynamism.

There were altogether 100 words in this group.

The set of utterances of group or clause status include:

The endless song;  
the changing patterns  
a comparative study;  
social values  
population survey;  
College of Education;  
when I entered the place;  
that was an overpass

There were altogether 20 entries in this group.

The performances were analysed, regrouped and pitched against the standards of the L<sub>1</sub> speaker and the educated user, with stress and duration marked as the main component, the accented positions (stressed positions in perceptual/phonetic terms) shown in capital letters and the long sounds underlined

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Wordlists - 1st Set

Practically every informant in this study indicated acceptable<sup>5</sup> accentual patterning in respect of practically all the words in this set. With the exception of a few cases which showed that 2 students of Diploma in Theatre Arts and 5 students of the Remedial Programme found the words *bazaar*, *enchanted* and *revoke* unfamiliar, all the other informantss followed the pattern of the model, as illustrated below:

British Model	Nigerian English
INcome	INcome
MOBILE	MOBILE
acCEPTance	acCEPTance
baZAAR	baZAAR
WORship	WORship
opPRESS	opPRESS
posSESSive	posSESSive
MIRror	MIRror
MIRacle	MIRacle
THINKer	THINKer
reVOKE	reVOKE

We can therefore claim that with English words of simplified and very familiar accentual positions, such as those studied here, there is no significant difference between the realization by Nigerians and the realization by L<sub>1</sub> (British) speakers. Even the durational differences in *bazaar* and *revoke* may be considered insignificant, as they represented only occasional departures.

### 3.2 Wordlists - 2nd Set

Practically all the 100 items listed in this set (with the possible exception of *advise*), witnessed one form of variation or the other in the accentual patterning. Items like *madam*, *Janet*, *David*, *July*, *associated*, *nullify*, *harass*, *criticism*, *success*, *legalize*, *apostolic*, *television*, *assimilate*, *tabulate*, *eradicate* had two variations. Others like *congratulate*, *distribute*, *negotiate*, *sophisticated*, *ascertain*,

British Model	Nigerian English
MADam	MADam -----> madAM
JANet	JANet -----> janET
DAVid	DAVid -----> davID
juLY	juLY -----> July
asSOciated	asSOciated ----> associAted
NULlify	NULlify -----> nulliFY
HARass	HARass -----> harASS
CRITicism	CRITicism ----> critleism
sucCESS	sucCESS -----> SUCcess
LEgalize	LEgalize -----> legalIZE
apostOLic	apostOLic -----> a POSTolic
TELEvision	TELEvision ----> teleVISION
asSIMilate	asSIMilate ----> assimILATE
TABulate	TABulate -----> tabuLATE
eRADicate	eRADicate ----> eradiCATE
conGRATulate	conGRATulate ---> congratuLAT -----> CONgratulate
disTRIBute	disTRIBute -----> distribUTE -----> DIStribute
neGOTiate	neGOTiate -----> negoTIATE -----> NEgotiate
soPHISticated	soPHISticated ----> sophistiCATED -----> SOphisticated
ascerTAIN	ascerTAIN -----> ASCertain -----> asCERTain
phoTOGraphy	-----> PHOtography
examinAtion	-----> Examination
HEADmaster	HEADmaster -----> headMASTER -----> HEADMASTER

As can be seen from the above illustrations, the accentual positions in the words moved from the first to the second in words like *madam, Janet, David*; from the second to the first in others like

*July*; from one syllable to at least two other positions in others like *distribute, ascertain* and *examination*.

The above and similar variations appear to be owing to the level of the informants' education in the language, as will be evident shortly.

### 3.3 *Utterances of Group or Clause Status*

A major feature of accentual variation in relation to utterances of group or clause structure was the phenomenon of juncture raising<sup>6</sup>. Prior to the final syllable of a word in the group or clause, there was an attested tendency by the informants to raise the syllable juncture. Thus we had examples like:

ENDLESS SONG instead of  
ENDless SONG;

the CHANGING PATterns instead of  
the CHANGing PATterns;

CONTRASTIVE THEORY instead of  
conTRAStive THEORY.

This phenomenon cuts across the classes, though it is particularly prevalent in the Innovative group.

### 3.4 *Accentual Variations According to Varieties*

Of the 120 informants studied, only 20 or 16.6% followed the pattern of the model or the educated class. These were made up of 6 from Communication Arts Department; 5 from English; 3 from Linguistics; 3 from Natural and Applied Sciences, 2 from the Remedial Programme, and

1 from Diploma in Theatre Arts. Further investigations showed that all the 20 who followed the pattern of the model and the educated usage had at one time or the other been in Broadcasting or had had exposure in Britain. This discovery thus emphasizes the importance of training (education in the subject) as well as appropriate exposure.

Two other findings of importance were:

- (i) that no final year student from any of the disciplines featured in the educated class. This probably shows that training in English pronunciation in the University system has not yet reached an appreciable standard and that the level of competence achieved by students before they come into the university is an important factor to fall back to.
- (ii) Informants from all the disciplines were represented in the innovative group. This also suggests that while the Nigerian speaker's discipline is important, his training in specific aspects of English pronunciation is more crucial to the attainment of acceptable and intelligible performance.

The following ten entries are thus used as illustrative instances of accentual variations according to variety differentiation in this study:

Educated Variety	General Variety	Innovative Variety
(i) MADam	MADam -----> mad	madAM
(ii) JANet	AM	JANet -->
(iii) DAVid	JANet -----> janET	janET
(iv) HARass	DAVid -----> david	DAVid -->
(v) sucCESS.	HARass ----> ha-	david
(vi) CRITicism	rASS	harASS
(vii) TELEvision	sucCESS ---> SUC-	SUCcess
(viii)disTRIBute	cess	criticism
	CRITicism -	teleVision
	criticism	
	TELEvision ----->	distribUTE
(ix) neGOTiate	teleVIsion	----> DIStrib-
	disTRIBute ----->	ute
	distribUTE	
(x) phoTOGra-		negoTIATE
phy	neGOTiate ----->	----> NEgotiate
	negoTIATE	
	phoTOgraphy ----->	photoGRAPHy
	>	-> PHOtogra-
	photoGRAPHy	phy.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have shown in this study that

- (i) accent, accentuation and stress are identifiable nonsegmental features of English, and that in spite of that fact, the three share a lot in common;
- (ii) varieties of Nigerian English may gainfully be limited to three:

Educated, General and Innovative;

- (iii) there is considerable variation in accentual patterning as shown in this study and such variations may gainfully be investigated on a larger scale to confirm their stability or nonstability.

It remains to add that notwithstanding the limits of our legitimate role of describing what actually obtains in relation to accentual patterning in Nigerian English, the great importance of fixed accentual patterning in English makes it more than a trivial point for Nigerian speakers of English to pay close attention to this nonsegmental feature if the acceptability and intelligibility of their output are to remain enhanced.

## ENDNOTES

1. In this paper we are concerned with English as a Second Language (L<sub>2</sub>) in the Nigerian Situation. However, information on the isolation of L<sub>1</sub>, L<sub>2</sub>, foreign and alternate language may be read in Eka (1990:127-128).
2. The issue of correctness as stated above should however not detain us, but it is important to note that the term *acceptable* is truer to the spirit of describing what actually occurs.
3. It will be a useful addition (on a small scale, though), to a major (Ph.D.) study currently being undertaken on the Rhythm of Nigerian English in the Department of English, University of Uyo.
4. The Educated and the General Varieties are self-explaining. We consider the term *Innovative* adequate for the third variety because even though the accentual patterning departs consistently from the patterns of the Educated and the General groups, their output still remains understood not only by those who are within the variety but also by speakers in the other varieties. So, this group is innovative in the sense of contributing to the enrichment of the language!
5. The L<sub>1</sub> speaker and the educated user generally set standards of acceptability (and hence intelligibility).
6. For detailed information on the overall phenomenon of juncture modification in Nigerian English see Eka (1992:1-8).

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