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# PHONOLOGICAL VARIATION IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

*Eno Grace Nta,  
Stella Asibong Ansa  
And Bassey Andian Okon*

## Introduction

English, a language which came into existence at the 5th century (Eka, 2000:7) is now spoken by over 700 million people all over the world with catchment areas covering places where English functions as the mother tongue and former British English colonies. In England (The United Kingdom), the United states of America, parts of Canada, Australia and New Zealand English has a mothertongue status but this is not the case with former British colonies. In these countries, English functions as a second language (L2). A second language may be defined as:

*a language which is usually the sequentially second language to a bilingual person. It may or may not be the sequentially second language of a bilingual person; it may be the fourth language of a bilingual individual, which however functions as a second language in societal bilingualism. (Akindele & Adegbite 1999:50).*

Some important characteristics of a second language therefore are:

- (i) It is often a colonial legacy
- (ii) It has legislative/legal backing
- (iii) Its use is widespread in both formal and informal contexts and domains
- (iv) It is the language of education
- (v) A local variety (varieties) of English has developed.

Countries where English is a second language include Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Phillipines, Singapore, South Africa, Srilanka, Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Libberia and the Gambia.

In these places, English plays the vital roles of medium for intra-and international communication and is endorsed for use in official, constitutional and educational domains. Yet with particular regard to education, despite over one hundred years of its being the language of education in Nigeria (Tomori 1981 in Okon 2000) educators, parents and indeed all stake holders



in education continue to decry the failing standards of English usage in the country. This is particularly marked at the phonological level where the characteristics of the indigenous languages; tone, phonotactic possibilities, segmental and suprasegmentals influence the variety of English that is spoken in Nigeria. This paper will focus on the segmental aspects of phonology as a first step in the description of Nigerian English (NE). In as much as plausible sociolinguistic, religious and political reasons could be advanced for this poor performance in English, the fact that a credit at the GCE/SSCE level is usually a pre requisite for admission into any tertiary institution demands that we take a fresh look at English in Nigeria within the ambit of the National Language Policy, the relationship between Nigerian English and World Standard English.

### ENGLISH IN THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY

The National Policy on Language use in Nigeria is presented in the document "Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education" first published in 1977 and revised in 1981. This document finds support in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (hereafter The Constituion).

In chapter V, Section 55: A908 of the Constitution, English is given official approval as the language of the National Assembly. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba could be introduced within the National Assembly as the members deem relevant, while in the Houses of Assembly in the 36 states of the nation, English remains the main contender, the choice of which Nigerian language(s) to be further incorporated the will be determined by the prevalent languages in the localities/states.

The place of English in the National Policy on Education (NPE) is decidedly more intricate. The language policy is stated in five sections and could be briefly summarized as:

*in order to preserve the people's culture, the Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. This aim is facilitated in*

- (i) The principal language for pre-primary education will be principally a Nigerian language;
- (ii) The orthography of many Nigerian Languages will be developed;
- (iii) Textbooks in Nigerian languages will be produced;
- (iv) Initial language of instruction in the primary school will be a Nigerian language but at a later stage will be English;

- (v) Language centres will be set up for the study of Nigerian languages mainly.

From the above, the incursion of English into the school system is that of a subject but it is later catapulted to serve as the medium of education in primary and all other levels of western education, science and technology. Although we do not subscribe to Bamgbose's (1985:97) claim that:

*The case for English has always been overstated. It is true that English is a common language, but only for the educated elites. Perhaps as many as 90 per cent of our people in both the urban and rural areas are untouched by its alleged communicative role.*

We however agree with him that:

*being assimilated to the English culture is not synonymous with adequate mastery of the English language.*

Unoh (1985) similarly admits that English imposes communicative restriction in the Nigerian context but adds that:

*every effort should be made to promote the study of English as used in Nigeria in a variety of context and situations, if the role of English as L<sub>2</sub> is to be fully appreciated and widely accepted by Nigerians (Unoh 1985:140).*

One area of relevance to linguists, policy makers, academics, students and indeed the Nigerian public is the description of the variety of English that is spoken in Nigeria.

Nigerian English like the World Standard English can be viewed on a cline that ranges from substandard to standard and this has attracted the attention of Banjo (1971) whose four spoken varieties correspond to educational attainment on a cline of no education, primary school products; secondary school products and first language experience. Odumuh's (1982) presentation has three typologies; non-standard, pidgin and Educated Nigerian English. Although Odumuh advances a syntactic and semantic description for these, further examination of his typologies in this paper, is provided through examples drawn from spoken Nigerian English.



### **Non-Standard:**

Is broken because the grammar breaks down, overtly relies on structure of Nigerian languages e.g. 'An Oga, this thief, is witch he use to steal our cloth'. The thief must have employed witchcraft to succeed in removing our clothers.

### **Nigerian Pidgin:**

Is widely used e.g. 'Wey you bin keep di money? I look for am sotay I tire. Na him make mi no fit chop' - Where did you keep the money? I searched all over, but couldn't find it. That's why I haven't eaten.

### **Educated Nigerian English:**

'I wonder what Jonny is up to. He left his akpu untouched and raced off as if the world is about to end. I can't tolerate that nonsense in my house; he should know that my grey hair is not for nothing.' Note lexical borrowing from a Nigerian language, the use of indigenous idiom, transliteration, the difference in modality and modulation from World standard English (WSE)/ Standard British English (SBE).

Of the three typologies, Odumuh's Educated Nigerian English would seem to exemplify what we term Nigerian English in this paper.

In another vein, Nigerian English could be said to represent various dialects/varieties, this time regional dialects. Just as we have the Cockney dialect, Reading, Liverpool dialects etc. of Standard British English, we could look at Hausa English, Igbo English and Yoruba English. Some examples are provided at this point. Note that the Standard Nigerian English version is given before the dialectal variations in brackets.

### **Yoruba English:**

"Which book are you reading self, is it very good?" - ['wis 'buk a: ju ri:di:n 'sef. is it feri gud] This is marked by the absence of the affricate/tts /tʃ/, deletion of a sound in 'self', nasalization of /i/. It is obviously exaggerated, but can be heard at motor parks, among junior/clerical officers and even is true of most primary school products and drop-outs from secondary schools.

### **Hausa Variety:**

"I read it fifty times and I still cannot solve the problem, haba'[ai reid it, phi:pti taims ai 'stʌio kant sʌlidʌ, 'floblem, hab'a]. Note the alternation between [p] and [f] and [i]; the ejective [t'] for [t]; vowel substitution and differenciation e.g. [ ]

### **Igbo Variety:**

The manager of the oil company donated one thousand naria to the best M.A. candidate." [di maneidzez >f di >jel 'kompeni douneited won tauzaend naria tu di best 'em ei 'kandidate it].

Note the absence of weak forms, the syllabic system alternation. The utterance is produced with marked hesitations.

The regional speech markers exemplified above are often obliterated with adequate exposure, and in fact are much used in comedy series in the Nigerian society e.g. The New Masquerade on Nigeria Television Authority network slot.

### **PROBLEM OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH (NE)**

Apparently in order to fully explore the problems of Nigerian speakers of English, we need to accept that there exists some homogeneity of speech which cuts across cultural/ethnic boundaries. But this is achieved by adequate exposure, an exposure that goes beyond secondary or in fact formal confines. Eka (1985) suggests that those who satisfy the triple criteria of discipline, training and motivation are capable of providing an N.E model for Standard Nigeria English (S.N.E.) In his exhaustive study he identified such speakers to be, "penultimate year Nigerian undergraduates reading either English or Education or both" Eka (1985:10). For the purpose of this paper, no concerted effort was made to identify a sample. However, much of the observations would apply to undergraduates in the University of Calabar. When other categories of Nigerians are referred to, these would be so stated.

### **DESCRIPTION OF NE**

In order to fully show the characteristics of NE, these will be often contrasted with Standard British English SBE. SBE has twenty-four consonant phonemes and twenty vowel phonemes and these do not differ too radically from what obtains indigenous Nigerian languages. Also when they are absent, as in the case of /θ/ or /ts/ in Yoruba, the articulation of consonants is observable and describable, therefore it could easily be mastered. But it is in vowel allocation that NE and SBE diverge, since they differ in quality.

Egbe (1979) shows the alternation between the twelve monophthongs of RP English or SBE and the seven of NE as follows:

RP English	ɪ - ɛ - æ - - - ʊ - ɔ - ʌ - ɜ - ə - ʌ
NE	ɪ - e - ɛ - æ - ʊ - ɔ

Since NE is short by five vowels, it condenses English vowels by merging quantity and quality.

Eka (1985:97) claims that NE has eleven monophthongs and eight diphthongs and that although NE exhibits qualitative difference from SBE, the short vowels are more frequent and stable in NE.

Vowels in SBE are weakened in unstressed syllables but this rarely occurs in NE, as attested to in our Igbo example. Let's examine a few more:

Word	NE	SBE
and	/an(d) - n(d)	/ən/
was	/wps/ - (wz)(wəs) (wɔz)	/wəz/
at	/ət/ - (əd) (ət)	/ət/
as	/əs/ - (əs)	/əz/

Also unlike SBE, NE is characterized by vowel simplification, Eka (1985:128) identifies four types and these are a simple dropping, complex dropping, total dropping and variant dropping.

	WORD	NE	SBE
Simple Dropping	Year	/ji /yeɔ/	/jia/
Complex Dropping	flower	/fla:/(flawa)	/flauə/
Total Dropping	custom	/kDstɔ/(kotm)/	/kʌstəm/
Variant Dropping	everywhere	/evriwe:/(enriwəi)	/evriueə/

SBE and NE have equal number of consonants. Unlike BE, /z/ is usually devoiced in inter-and post-vocalic positions, but voiced after voiceless sounds. Lets take a look at some examples:

Word	NE	SBE
Visit	visit	vizit
Wishes	wiɕis	wiɕiz
wished	wiɕd	wiɕt



In addition, Eka (1985:134-5) identifies four types of consonant variants in NE these are:

- a) Those phonologically conditioned
  - /p/ - [p, p<sup>h</sup>, f]
  - /b/ - [b, b<sup>h</sup>, ɸ]
  - /t/ - [t, t<sup>h</sup>]
- b) Those orthographically conditioned
  - /ɪ/ - [ɪ, ɪ̥] /θ/ - [θ, t̪]
  - /z/ - [z, s]
  - /ʒ/ - [ʒ, z]
  - /ð/ - [z, d, t,]
- c) Those which occur as a result of devoicing of voiced consonants or voicing of voiceless consonants.
  - dʒ - [dʒ, dʒ̥, tʃ]
- d) Those which feature as consonant alternates e.g
  - ŋ - [ŋ, ŋg, n]

Standard British English has a C<sub>3</sub>VC<sub>4</sub> syllabic system, while NE has a predominately CV system, but most clusters of English do not pose a hurdle for NE users. However, with final clusters, some divergence occurs between SBE and NE speech.

NE	SBE	WORD
/θs/	/ðz/	clothes
/θd/	/θt/	earthed
/sd/	/st/	produced
/ d/	/st/	just
/nds	/st/	grounds
/lvs/	/ndz/	themselves
/ŋz/	/ŋz/	brings
/nt/	/nd/	change
/ns/	/nz/	persons
/ms/	/mz/	comes
/sn/	/zs/	business
/vs/	/vz/	arrives
/kd/	/kt/	walked
/rs/	/z/	cars

(Source: Eka 1985:142 - 143)

These could also be seen as being phonologically conditioned realization but which NE speakers give orthographical renditions. (6)

The difference between NE and SBE is greatest at the non-segmental level. SBE is an intonation language but NE absorbs influence from Nigerian languages which are predominantly tonal. The consequence is that NE interpretes the characteristic dissimilatory property of stress as assimilatory e.g.

Word	NE	SBE
examination		

And since tones now prevail, vowels do not assume their weak forms, but retain their full quality e.g.

Word	SBE	NE
have	əv	Have you seen it? What have you brought? I've found it.

When we relate intonation, tone and rhythm to particular categories such as question tags, politeness forms, subordination, we enter an area that is traditionally regarded as a major area of divergence between NE and SBE. With politeness forms for instance, NE employs a falling tone, a tone which is symptomatic of statements and commands. Reliance for signaling the politeness is reposed in the word 'please.' But in SBE, the tone marker carries the communicative force. This is so because SBE is stress-timed while NE is not. What obtains in NE has been termed 'inelastic' and describes as the inability of speakers "to stretch out the time to accommodate the many available unstressed syllables". Eka, (1985:290). So whereas SBE is elastic-timed, NE is inelastic-timed.

Intonation in SBE not only provides information but indicates speaker's attitudes while in NE, it gives weight to information.

## PROSPECTS OF NE

Are we to infer all these that NE is sub-standard, or inferior to SBE? No. NE has its right of existence in the same way as Ghanaian English, American or Asian English have. And just as we may identify sub-standard speech in SBE, the same can hold for NE. The peculiarities, if they are such, of NE do not hamper communication and are not rejected internationally. NE actually satisfies the two criteria of local acceptability. NE has to its credit

the fact that it enriches the English language. Some of NE'S positive features include:

- a. Coinages- Each morning we are microphoned from bed by the Moslems; Students unrest is common in our Universities.
- b. Extention of meaning e.g. lesson for private tuition in "my children go for lesson from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. daily."
- c. Transfer of Nigerian Idioms: The two drivers dragged the matter.
- d. Transfer traditional expresions of warmth into English e.g. use of 'sorry' and 'well done'
- e. Unique idioms have developed sometimes in the use of acronyms:  
*Sappy days are here; WAI is over* *sometimes simply novel: go-slow; students unrest*
- f. Perculiar constructions: 'He is with the book. 'I pray that 'God will prosper you: 'I am believing God to get me a job'. Much of these stylistic resources of NE are amply utilized in literary forms - drama, poetry and the novel. NE is therefore legitimate and all effort should be made to ensure its effective usage.

## CONCLUSION:

From the foregoing, we may assume that the position of English is not as assured as we would have anticipated, and indeed, we support the development of Nigerian languages if only to satisfy the psychological, emotional and educational gains that may accrue from such endeavours. But we maintain, even more strongly that English is a world language, language of science and technology and that in the Nigerian nation it is multi-functional. It is the official language, the language of education and beyond that it enhances inter-cultural and inter-ethnic communication and understanding in a multi-lingual milieu. Therefore, we cannot afford to ignore its role and cast it overboard. Rather, as we encourage the healthy development of Nigerian languages, we advocate that we ensure that Nigerians effectively master and use English as the need arises.



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