

# Sociolinguistic Analysis of Nigerian English As A Product of Language Contact

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## Abstract

*The worldwide spread of English language as one of the most prominent linguistic reality of our time is attracting international interest and scholarly attention. Designations such as World Englishes, New Englishes, Modern English, West African English, Australian English and Indian English have gained prominence in linguistic domains. The phrase 'Nigerian English' has also surfaced in the last five decades or so. The purpose of this paper is to investigate language contact and how it has led to the emergence of Nigerian English as a product of language contact and the main characteristics of the progeny of such a linguistic union. The paper also reappraises the argument surrounding the existence or non-existence of a distinct variety of English known as 'Nigerian English'. Consequently, literary texts representing the three major speech communities in Nigeria-Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo were linguistically analyzed alongside a review of scholarly inputs on language contact and Nigerian variety of English which has evolved as a product of language contact and the extent of such contact further determine the variety of Nigerian English obtainable among different speakers in the different speech communities across the country.*

**Keywords:** Language contact, English language, Englishes, Nigerian English, Pidgin, Product, Literary Text, Variations.

## Introduction

Historically linguistics aids the understanding of the emergence of dialectal variations of English language. Highlighting the point of language contact, the languages in contact, the approximate historical period and the linguistic products peculiar to Nigerian English shall be the focus of this study. The initial contact of Nigeria with Western Europe especially the Portuguese began as early as 16th century. That initial contact which fell within the historical

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context of transatlantic slave trade was the first phase of linguistic and cultural contact with Nigerians and their languages.

Colonialism followed the abolition of slave trade. Rodney observes that colonialism took off in 1885 after Berlin Conference in Germany. British colonialism and imperialism resulted in the global spread of English language in the nineteenth century. Jowitt states that pidgin became the first product of language contact with the Portuguese and British. (12)

As the concerns of the Western Europeans grew beyond trade to include religion and politics, they moved into the interior parts of the country leading to the general establishment of British rule. In the 20th century, Jowitt adds that colonialism led to the fresh influx of Whites who were mostly of British origin from the upper or middle strata of British society and they occupied most sectors such as military, education, construction, oil business and civil service leading to the entrenchment of Standard British English (RP). (15)

It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of language contact occurred not only in Nigeria but also outside Nigeria between Nigerians and mostly Europeans. With the emergence of educated Nigerians in the 19th century, a class of elite emerged as a product of contacts with Europeans in Nigeria, Britain and elsewhere. Jowitt recounts that the few privilege Nigerians who travelled abroad visited Britain and the United States of America more than any other country in the last few decades have been influenced linguistically though not equally depending on individual attitude (15). Therefore, what is referred to as Nigerian English is obviously a product of the linguistic and cultural contacts of Nigerian with the Western Europeans, especially the Britons in the course of trade, schooling, civil service, professions, missionary activities and journeys to countries of native speakers.

## **Conceptual Meaning**

### **The Concept of Language**

The New Encyclopedia Britanica, 15th edition defines language as “a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate.” (147) English language and Portuguese as systems of conventional spoken or written symbols by which their native speaker forms social groups, participate in their respective cultures and communicated contacted another set of roughly 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria.

## **The Concept of Language Contact**

Scholars hold the view that when two different languages come in contact, change is the result and the product is usually a new variety. As stated above, the phenomenon of language contact occurred in Nigeria and outside Nigeria. Jowitt states that lawyers, academics, journalists, bishops and military officers of Nigerian extraction “interacted with White people in the same professions and acquired many of their prejudices and linguistic habit” (15). A glance at history reveal the fact language contact has produced many linguistic products around the world. Ajani argues that just as Latin is said to give birth to French, Spanish and Italian during the renaissance period while Arabic led to Algerian Arabic and Tunisian Arabic, so also should the emergence of Nigerian English be considered as a normal and natural linguistic process that takes place in an atmosphere of mobility as well as language and culture contact (2). Seba as cited in Ajani buttresses the fact this way:

It is a well-known sociolinguistic fact that when two or more languages and cultures come into contact, different types of sociolinguistic chemistry take place. Sometimes a diglossic situation may result, or language shift, attrition or even language death. In some other instances it can lead to the formation of a pidgin, a creole, or even the birth of a new language altogether (2).

The same of the sociolinguistic features quoted above are obvious when Nigerian English is studied.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

The theoretical framework of this paper is language contact theory on one hand and language variation and change on the other hand. It is realistic to admit that modern day contact linguistics as pioneered by Uriel Weinreich is quite a nascent field to be explored. Scheneider adopts the language contact theory of Thomason which is an outline of surveys of processes, scenarios and characteristic outcomes of language contact. Scheneider states that the closer the contact, the more likely the strong contact effects. While borrowing is a product of light contact, creolization, attrition and death are results of high contact. It can then be deduced that pidgin and diglossia are somewhere within the wide continuum. He adds that the conditions stating that contact-induced change and interference can be achieved by a variety of mechanism such as code-switching, code alternation, passive familiarity, second language acquisition strategies, bilingual and first language acquisition. He however acknowledges that generalizations in contact linguistics are essentially probabilistic in nature and hence have to be contextualized (21-22).

The economic, historical, political and socio-cultural factors that combine to produce Nigeria English make it distinct, linguistically and culturally, from other varieties in English as second language or foreign language environments. However, just as each variety of English will have various dialects, reflecting a multilingual environment, so also English has sub-varieties in a multilingual environment like Nigeria having not less than 400 indigenous languages.

### **Nigerian English**

The existence of Nigerian English has been a debate continuum among linguists. At one extreme are the linguists who out rightly reject its existence or at best label it with all sorts of derogatory labels while at the other extreme are those who acknowledge its existence and are even taking bold steps to identify, analyze, describe and even standardize it. In some instances, Nigerian English is equated with Nigerian pidgin. Prescriptive linguists who prescribe what ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ usage is easily discard certain Nigerian usages. Ajani cites some scholars interpreting Nigerian English from a deviant perspective. Salami contends that what has been identified as Nigerian English is in reality “errors of usage”. Vincent sees Nigerian English as “bad English”. Bokamba recognizes the existence of a Nigerian English and refers to it as a variety of what he called West African Vernacular English (WAVE). (1)

However, Ajani observes that such writers are “to a large extent voicing the concerns of a host of EL teachers in Nigerian institutions of learning who finds it quite derogatory and rather insulting to refer to such a variety of EL (1). If any slight departure from the British variety is considered as either deviant or incorrect, then such an approach kills creativity. Ajani also cites Odumuh who provides a theoretical basis which is the development of variation studies in order to justify the existence of Nigerian English. Odumuh goes further to argue that the existence of a single super-ordinate variety of English language presupposes that of other forms of usage in Nigerian speech community. He gives the indexical lexical, semantic, syntactic and phonological features at written and spoken levels that distinguish Nigerian English from and other variety of the language concluding that the Nigerian variety satisfy the criteria of local acceptability and international intelligibility. (2)

A careful look at some lexical and semantic features will prove the fact that Nigerian English is largely a case of domestication and adaptation in trying to maintain the cultural, traditional and philosophical beliefs. There are words in Nigerian indigenous languages that if Anglicized, will only compromise the cosmology and world view and in short, the semantics of the word can be lost automatically. Words like “omugo” (an Igbo term for nursing a new born baby),

‘Tor Tiv’ (King of Tiv) and ‘juju’ do not have English equivalents hence cannot be Anglicized. It is therefore not justifiable to state that every deviation from British usage is an outright ‘bad English’ or ‘error’. Ajani quotes Bamgbose who states an attested to the facts that in language contact situation, a second language is most likely to be influenced by its linguistic environment. He argues that since the existence of different Englishes has a general acceptance among linguists worldwide, it then follows that the question of whether there is a Nigerian English should not arise. Bamgbose identifies three different approaches to the study of Nigerian English namely: “interference, the deviation and creativity approaches” (3). The first approach studies Nigerian English as a function of the mother tongue interference but he argues that not all forms of interference arise from L1 (mother tongue) since some forms might be coming from Nigerian pidgin English. The second argument against the interference approach is that it ignores semantics extension and creation of new idioms which are normal processes of language development in all native language backgrounds. The deviant approach which is mostly expounded by prescriptive linguists has also been considered above and for this Bamgbose argues that it excludes the fact certain usages in Nigerian English are as a result of creativity. The creativity approach focuses on the resources of local languages and English language to create new expressions and idioms. This approach recognizes the autonomy of Nigerian English but warns that not all Nigerian English usages arise out of linguistic creativity. Bamgbose further says though the three approaches shed some light in characterizing the entire spectrum of Nigerian English and therefore proposes a combination of all three approaches (3).

It is justifiable to assert at this point that the existence of Nigerian English has gone beyond any reasonable doubt although it may still take a while before it receives wide acceptance among the general populace. At the moment, it is gaining recognition and more positive attitude and the task before linguist is to identify specify, analyze, describe and standardize it.

### **General Features of Nigerian English**

The concern here is not the common core features found in all varieties of English but the indexical markers that distinguish Nigerian English from any other variety. In considering any particular variety, the synchronic systems of that variety comprising of phonetics and phonology, syntax, lexis and semantics discourse, speech acts and stylistics are studied. Most scholars have concurred that Nigerian English is not a homogenous entity but is characterized by features found in various speech communities that could contain mother tongue flavor and

the creativity in new expression and idioms. What is referred to here as general features of Nigeria English are what Jowitt calls ‘popular Nigerian English’ (53).

Kparevzua citing from the Oxford Companion of the English language denitrifies some features in pronunciation grammar and vocabulary. The non rhetoric feature of pronunciation in Nigerian English is identified and she argues that RP is no longer the norm for the media. In her observation uncountable nouns are sometimes used as countable nouns e.g ‘I am grateful for your many advices...’ she considers the vocabulary of Nigerian English as characterized by borrowings from local languages and pidgin, loan transaction from local languages and coinages for local purpose examples are cited below:

Borrowing - Oga (Yoruba term for master)

Ogbanje (Igbo word for spirit child)

Dash (pidgin word for giving a gift)

Loan from local languages - have long legs (to exert influence)

Coinages for local purpose - I hear French (I understand French)

I'm coming (I will be with you soon)

Senior brother (elder brother) (2-3)

She adds some peculiar Nigerian usages as

Motor Park (bus terminus or bus stop)

Strong head      (strong – head)

Cut your coat according to your size (cut your coat according to your cloth)

Please take your seat (sit down or be seated) (4) Kparevzua further argues that the different varieties of English around the world also have their unique lexical inputs and mention the Macquarie library in Sydney which produced a highly acclaimed Australian English dictionary in 1981 and an Asian English dictionary in 1997 containing thousands of Singaporean, Malaysians, Philippine and Hong Kong English words (5).

Jowitt adds more examples of lexical variants like the word ‘sorry’, ‘customer’ and ‘brother’ that slightly differ from Standard British English due to Lexico-semantic extension (62 – 63). He adds that the popular vocabulary analyzable in Nigerian English is characterized by constituents such as local coinages that conform with SBE morphological principles, extended or restricted meaning of existing SBE words or expression, expressions additional to those that have restricted or extended meaning, expression which have become clichés, pidgin words or expression, loan words or expression, slang and stylistic usage that differs from SE usage (130 – 131). Some examples of these constituent share already been cited above and these instances are variants not errors.

At the level of phonetics, Jowitt argues that there is more variation in pronunciation of consonants among Hausa; Yoruba and Igbo speakers of English than there are for vowels. Nigerians seem to tolerate nonstandard vowels in the speech of other Nigerians more readily than they do for non-standard consonants (86). The phonological peculiarities that define Nigeria English, according to Jowitt, include the use of falling tone where SBE uses rising or falling rising tone, assigning more rising tone to questions than SBE including even tag questions, absence of rising, falling tone and the pronunciation of every utterance with a fixed intonation pattern (104-105).

Varieties of Nigerian English through Nigerian English is a national variety, a closer look at the usages of the national variety will lead to the identification of regional varieties which may be called dialects. Not much attention will be made on functional and social varieties except passing comments here. It is a Herculean task to identify, describe, analysis or specify the regional varieties of Nigerian English since it is a speech continuum. Another reason is the demographic factor which places Nigerian English as the second largest English as second language environment with roughly 400 indigenous languages after India. Whatever parameter used in disentangling the regional varieties, a clear-cut demarcation is still elusive.

For the sake of analysis, only the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo shall be used to portray Nigerian English as a product of language contact and identify some characteristics that distinguish them from one another without requiring those features to qualify the regional varieties to be classified as different language. Three literacy texts have also been selected in order to identify linguistic features that define the regional varieties. The texts are collected plays 2 by Wole Soyinka as cited in Ajani (for Yoruba) Chinua Achebe’s Arrow of God (for Igbo) and Zainab Alkali’s virtuous women (for Hausa speech community).



## Yoruba English

The Yoruba speech community is arguably the earliest to have contact with the Europeans as early as the 16th century. Soyinka's collected plays 2 is an example of Nigerian creative writing that contains some linguistic data that aid our analysis and description of the regional variety that has come to be known as Yoruba English. Ajani cites some examples below:

1. Towards the end of this speech the sound of 'gangan' drums is heard, coming from the side opposite the hut. A boy enters carrying a drum on each shoulder (cp 2: 152).
2. A man in an elaborate 'agbada' outfit, with long train and a cap is standing right, down stage, with a sheaf of notes in his hand (cp 2: 167).
3. Silva: Now, now, let's stop all this silliness. Here let have another go. It's all a mater of tempo, not like high life or juju music. Now shall we to this time, follow the score (cp 2: 189).
4. Bola: What do you have on the menu today?

Waiter: We have Dodo, Akara, Amala, Eba and Tuwo

Bola: What about soup, what kind of soup do you have for today?

Waiter: We have Egusi soup, Ewedu and Ogbono. Which one would you prefer? We also have bush met, Obokun, Oku-Eko and Pomo

Bola: Okay, give me a plate of Amala, Egusi soup and Bush meat... (fp).

5. Tola (To Kudi): Are we going to branch Dele's house on our way to the market?

Kudi: No! We are too late already, and mommy'll be getting worried about us

In examples (1) and (2) above, we find instances of direct transfer from Yoruba. Soyinka leaves the Yoruba words Gangan and Agbada in quotes to signal to the reader that these are direct loans. Gangan is a type of drum sometimes referred to as the 'talking drum' which is also a coinage. Agbada is to the Yoruba what the suit is to the British and Americans. These terms lack of English equivalents and tolerating them in English in the original literary text could comprise their sanctity in Yoruba cosmology.

Juju in (3) above is a type of music that has its origin in Yoruba land, though it has now been exported. In (4), we have various names of indigenous foods such as Akara, Eba, Egusi, Tuwo,



Amala, Ogbono, Ewedu some of which have been taken even from outside Yoruba culture and tradition. However, Dodo, Akara, Amala, Eba, Egusi, Ewedu, Obokun, Oku-Eko and Pommo are all direct loans from Yoruba language. Dodo is fried plantain, Akara is a snack from black eyed peas; Amala is a meal from yam flour while Eba is made from cassava grit called Gari, Egusi is indo-seed sauce while Ewedu is a leafy vegetable source. Example (5) above shows the morpho-syntactic feature of Yoruba English. The word ‘branch’ is a loan shift, borrowing additional means from the Yoruba word ‘ya’ whose meaning include to turn or go in a different direction (4 – 9).

### **Igbo English**

The Igbo speech community located at South Eastern Nigeria has very rich culture. Their earliest contact with the white men who occupied the Igbo communities for missionary activities and to enforce colonial legacies has been aptly captured by some Nigerian creative writers. Chinua Achebe is prominent among them in capturing this language contact, conflict of culture and attendant use of English by the Igbo. Instances of these are derived from one of Achebe’s novels *Arrow of God*, first published in 1964.

1. Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu told us about what his father told him about the olden days (16).

2. ‘Which one is called Ezeulu?’ Asked the corporal. ‘Which Ezeulu?’ Asked Edego.

Don’t ask me which Ezeulu again or I shall slap okra seeds out of your mouth. I say who is called Ezeulu here? (153).

3. The unwary European who bared himself to it received the death-kiss. (29)

4. ‘son of our daughter, you should know our habits’. (22)

5. He checked the remaining ones again and went back to his obi, shutting the door of the barn carefully after him. (3)

6. He beat his ogene GOME GOME GOME GOME...and immediately children’s voices took up the news on all sides. (2)

7. He who will swallow Udala see must consider the size of his anus. (226)

8. Let me build a fire to see your face. (227)

9. ‘Umuaro kwenu!’

‘Hem!’

‘Kwezuenu!’

‘Hem’ I salute you all’ (16-17)

In example (1) above, creativity is displayed in the employment of African expressions to create figures of speech that are of African origin. The domestication of simile by Nwaka is a typical case of Igbo English in which expressions are embellished with Igbo figures of speech such as “wisdom is like a goatskin bag”. In example (2), the attempt of the corporal ‘to slap the okra seeds’ out of the mouth of Edogo is another case of creativity simply in an attempt to nativize English by Igbo speakers. The police corporal sent to arrest Ezeulu the Chief Priest who is Edogo’s father is also an Igbo man, only that he is a collaborator with the Whiteman in threatening Igbo culture and traditions. In this culture and social context, the police corporal means Edogo is too outspoken to ask him questions. Slippery ‘okra seeds’ is metaphoric in that context. In example (3) and (4), cases of direct translations are evident. ‘Death-kiss’ and ‘son of our daughter’ are all direct translations from Igbo language. ‘death-kiss’ is used in Igbo to express deathly situations while what is referred to as grandson in native English is here referred to as ‘Son of our Daughter’ just as they are used in Igbo language. in (5) and (6), the lexical items *obi* and *ogene* are direct transfers or direct loans from Igbo language. Achebe italicized the words to signal to the readers that these are direct loans. *Obi* means a special hut reserved for the head of the family in this context while *ogene* is a special town-crying instrument peculiar to the Igbo people. The sound of the *ogene* is also reflective of the Igbo world view. The capitalization of the onomatopoeic word ‘GOME’ portrays sound imagery of the instrument. Example (7) is a proverb which is just one of so many. This is an Igbo proverb that means meaning only in an Igbo context. Proverbs are mostly spoken by elders in Arrow of God just as it is found in Igbo culture and tradition. Achebe himself has argued that ‘proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten’. Proverbs are an essential rhetoric in Igbo discourse. Example (8) shows us that while the English man ignites fire, the Igbo man ‘builds fire’. This syntactic construction portrays the way and matter fire is set in Igbo culture that warrants the syntactic construction, ‘build fire’. The Igbo construction in its own right cannot just be thrown away as incorrect. Code-switching is apparent in example (9). ‘Umuara Kwenu!’ is a case of code-switching for social solidarity in the context.

## Hausa English

Hausa speech community located in the Northern hemisphere of Nigeria is the last to have contacts with the whites from Europe. The Arabs contacted the Hausa speech community much earlier for trade and religious purposes. The nature of the contact of Europeans with the Hausa speech community is responsible for the kind of English used in the region. Zainab Alkali's the Virtuous Woman has been selected in order to identify some indexical markers of English in the Hausa speech community.

1. She lifted her small uncle gently out of the bucket... (8)
2. College of the woman-chief-of-the-white (3)
3. Her Majesty College Kudu (3)
4. Asheeee, how then do we come in? (4)
5. 'Don't you know Lizabet Sukl of Ingila?'
6. 'Amin, grandfather' she replied (13)
7. You will see (23)
8. By God this is no sight of them (63)

In example (1), (2) and (3) above, the expression of Alkali's characters which are of Hausa extractions are uses of direct translation. Expressions such as 'small uncle', -chief-of-the-white (referring to Queen Elizabeth of England) are directly translated from Hausa language syntax. In example (4) and (6), the words 'Asheeee' and 'Amin' are cases of code-switching from English to Hausa. 'Asheeee' could mean 'so' while 'Amin' means 'Amen'. In example (7), 'you will see' is used more as a threat than an illustration or observation. This is a sort of syntactic-semantic extension. The use of 'by God' in (8) is peculiar to Hausa speech community characterized by a cosmology that rests solely on the supernatural and Supreme Being (God). His name is invoked in prayers, oaths and making grave statements. Nana's school teacher makes the frank statements to caution his students from watching the accident's scene that could disturb their memories later on. Mother-tongue interference is evident in example (5) where Boni pronounces 'Elizabeth' as 'Lizabeth' school as 'sukul' and England as 'Ingila'. This kind of vulgar errors are characteristic of those with a slight or no contact with SBE hence their poor mastery of English. The prestige of English language coupled with inter-

regional competition, survival and fear of domination mount enormous pressure on Hausa speech community to acquire English language to an appreciable extent.

### **Nigerian Pidgin English**

The New Webster International Comprehension Dictionary of English defines pidgin as a rudimentary language with few lexical items and less complex grammatical rules used in a lingua franca between speakers from two different speech communities in a contact. Pidgin is called a marginal language. many pidgins sprang up from the coast of China, Africa and elsewhere to accommodate trade and other missionary activities with Europeans. Jowitt observes that the arrival of the Portuguese to the Nigerian coast as early as the 16th century for trade was going to last for about 300 years. He argues that such initial contact with Western Europeans was the first phase of linguistic and cultural contact with Nigerians and their languages up to the 19th century (12). In describing English-based pidgin, Jowitt observes that:

The common element is that each of them is a compound of an extraneous language (usually English) and some indigenous language or languages, and began life as a school language used for a limited range of purposes, especially trade in communication between two races (12).

He further argues that Nigerian English Pidgin is a debased form of a Standard English and Portuguese with syntax heavily influenced by languages of Southern Nigeria and used as an inter-ethnic medium of communication especially, trade. Pidgin is also used between educated peers as a sign of intimacy. He concludes that pidgin resources have also been exploited by Nigeria's creative writers such as Achebe in all his novels, except *Things Fall Apart* and Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters*, *The Road* and the *Jero* plays where it is used to delineate between educated and uneducated characters (12-13). A typical instance of this is the semi-literate policemen who are of Igbo extraction but employed by the colonial administration and sent to arrest Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Their conversation is below:

The two policemen conferred in the Whiteman's tongue to the great admiration of the villagers. 'sometime na dat two porson we cross for road', said the corporal. 'sometime na dem' said his companion. 'but we no go return back just like that. All this waka way we waka come here, no fit go for nating'

The expressions 'na dat two porson', 'na dem' 'we no go return' and 'this 'waka way we waka come here no fit go for nating' are all pidginized Nigerian English.

Nigerian English is spoken in all the regions of the country though more or less in different regions. With the increasing number of the Nigerian English Pidgin speakers and the prominence it is given by the media, the variety could keep gaining wider acceptance and recognition. Ajani quotes Faracles who provides evidence that there is a new generation of young Nigerians for whom Nigerian pidgin English is rapidly becoming a mother tongue (3). With these realities at hand coupled with the peculiar argument that pidgin reflects human creative linguistic ability, Nigerian Pidgin English is now a potential field of linguistic research.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to consider language contact and how it leads to the variety of English language known as Nigerian English. After considering the literature written by scholars and some literary texts of Nigerian creative writers, the unequivocal conclusion is that language contact is responsible for the emergence of Nigerian English. The argument about the non-existence of Nigerian English is simply a denial of reality hence the task before linguists and experts, especially of Nigeria origin, is to specify, analyze, describe, legitimize and Standardize Nigeria English to serve and keep serving the various cultural purposes and needs in Nigeria. Though it may appear a nascent field with little studies done on it, yet the availability of data and sound theoretical basis coupled with the arrival of corpora and other online resources provide the possibilities of research in Nigerian English. The creative potentials should be unleashed in developing a Nigerian variety that is peculiar to the Nigerian realities. Then shall Nigeria stop being a language colony of any masters but in the words of the Filipino poet Gemino Abad we can boast: ‘English is now ours, we have colonized it too’.

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