

Nigerian English: Identifying the Challenges Towards International Intelligibility and Acceptability

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Abstract

The concept of domestication and nativisation has been at the forefront of the discussions on non-native varieties of English. Scholars over the years have drawn attention to how the English language is being adapted to the culture of non-native speakers, while still retaining many of its original features as used by native speakers. The domestication of English is no longer in contention or a surprise in the former colonies of Britain. This paper using Robert Lado's 1957 Constructive Analysis Hypothesis as the theoretical framework draws attention to the importance of context in usage especially when acquiring a second language. In this paper, the author examined Nigerian English in the light of its unique characteristics emanating from the mood of acquisition of the language by Nigerians and the socio-cultural environment in which English is used and the challenges it poses in the context of international intelligibility and acceptability.

Keywords: Domestication, Nativisation, Localisation, Native Speakers, Peculiar Word Coinages, Intelligibility and Acceptability.

Introduction

Change and expansion are part of the reality of the use of lexical items. Items already in existence in a language can change in meaning or even become moribund and obsolete, while new ones are formed and added to the lexicon. One important fact about linguistic dispersion is that concepts that exist in other cultures filter into and are appropriated by other languages, which have contact with such cultures. English language, being one of the most widely dispersed languages in the world constantly has its lexical items go through such changes and expansion. This is particularly true in the context of its existence in places far away from its origin.

Achebe (1975) paid particular attention to the multi-coloured varieties of Nigerian English when he said, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of the African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding". (P.21)

In Nigeria, we have often heard people discuss freely about the concept of "Nigerian English" and according to Ogu (1992), Walsh (1967) was among the first to draw attention to the existence of a variety of English language known as 'Nigerian English'. Ogu quoted Walsh as saying that:

The varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English (1992, p.88).

Since then, scholars and linguists of repute have thrown their weight behind it as a legitimate variety and a socio-linguistic reality (cf. Spencer, ed. 1971; Ubahakwe, ed. 1979; Pride, ed. 1982; Kachru, ed. 1983; Jowith, 1991; Bamgbose, et al, 1995; Adetugbo, 1979; Eka, 2000; Udofot and Edem 2018; Edem, 2018; Enang and Udoka 2018; Enang and Edem 2022; Edem 2016, Edem 2023) and have shifted their concerns to issues of its identification and characterization. It is no longer used as a derogatory term or one characterized by errors and non-standard forms as language purists tend to view it, neither is it one of an inferior status to others like British, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand English (Eka 2000, Edem 2005, Edem 2015, Edem 2018, Kaan et al. 2013, Enang and Edem 2022, Edem 2023).

The English language in Nigeria has undergone “domestication” (Achebe, 1975), “localization” (Kachru, 1983, Udofot and Edem 2018) and “nativisation” (Odumuh, 1993, Edem, 2018). These special nomenclatures are significant when explaining the new narrative that the new English have come to be seen as a new reality with all our endeavours (Edem 2015, 2018, Edem 2023) and we are in the process of transferring, planting and developing the language in a non-native environment. Put simply, in Achebe's view, we should bend the language to suit our thought patterns, so as to perform tasks that are suitable to us instead of looking at English as the language of the foreign colonizers with the attendant colonial hangover.

Review of Related Literature

Enang and Udoka (2018) examined a recoloured variety of the standard British English in Nigeria. A new English variety in a new environment. The authors who used Zhang Guruo 2016 norm-breaking and non-making approaches as theoretical framework posit that Nigerian English, which is a nativised variety is not an inferior variety because it breaks metropolitan (native Speaker's) norms rather the emergence of the new variety is tailored to meet the communication needs of the new environment.

Tunde-Awe (2014) in her study harps on the nativisation of English language in a multilingual setting: The Example of Nigeria, she observed that such deviations experienced in Nigerian English should not be considered as 'institutionalized errors' rather the author reiterated the need to standardize and codify Nigerian English and then incorporate it in the dictionary while also paying particular attention to Igboanusi's effort in producing a dictionary of Nigerian English Usage as cites in Tunde-Awe (2014).

Edem (2018) harps on Nativisation of English Language in a Multilingual and Cultural Setting: The Nigerian Experience. This paper explored the processes and areas of nativisation in Nigerian English as well as the attitudes of the people to the nativised variety in the new environment. The author debunks the erroneous conception that the nativised variety is an inferior variety but argues strongly that the new English is 'altered to suit the new environment but it is still in communion with its ancestral home' which as evidence of cultural and linguistic identity.

Taiwo (2009) examined Polysemous Usage in Domesticated English Varieties: A Case Study of the Verb “See” in Nigerian English. The author agrees that domestication of English is now a reality in the former colonies of Britain. It draws attention to the importance of context in usage. The study identifies fifteen different senses of the verb 'see' considered to be peculiar to Nigerian English usage cutting across both the educated and the uneducated lethal domains to express the Nigerian experience.

Kaan, et al (2013) examined Nigerian English in the light of its unique characteristics emanating from the mood of acquisition of the language by Nigerians and the socio-cultured environment in which English is now used. The authors using Uriel Weinreich Theory of Language in Contact agree that the Nigerian English has been 'cultivated and re-domesticated to accommodate the culture and tradition of the people. The paper agrees that the use of idioms and proverbs among other semantic issues poses a strong challenge to the notions of international intelligibility and acceptability.

Theoretical Framework

This work made use of Robert Lado's (1957) Constructive Analysis Hypothesis as a theoretical framework. This approach was chosen based on the idea that a person's native language influences the ability to learn a second language. Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of language with a view to identify structural differences and similarities.

Put simply, Lado's hypothesis agrees that difficulties in acquiring a new (second) language are derived from the differences between the new language and the native (first) language of a language user. Other scholars as listed in the review of related literature studied in this work have dwelt on the concept of Nigerian English as a distinct variety but none to my knowledge has addressed the endemic challenges posed by speakers of the Nigerian variety nor addressed the notion of its intelligibility and acceptability outside the immediate environment.

Analysis of Data/Results

This situation could as a result of the mother tongue interference in speeches by most Nigerian Speakers of the language, shows that a situation where two languages overlap, the features of the dominant language are transferred into the subordinate language at the phonological, lexical and grammatical levels. The situation also accounts for the cause of deviations from the norms or standard native English as shown in the following examples:

- a) I gave the policeman kolanut (bribe) before I was released.
- b) I saw the man and I passed his course (sorting or bribe)
- c) Don't mind that girl, she used longlegs to get a job (connection)
- d) Don't worry, he will see me (a threat)
- e) Don't make me a visitor here (let me feel at home)
- f) He is a total stranger (though he comes from there, he behaves like a visitor)
- g) He stayed in Aba for years (lived)
- h) Ijeoma hears English language very well (understands)
- i) Cut your coat according to your size (for British English, cut your coat according to your cloth)
- j) I will declare surplus (British English, I will spend lavishly)
- k) A woman has taken in (she is pregnant)
- l) To put sand in one's garri (it means to jeopardise opportunity or chance for somebody)
- m) She has not seen her period (she is pregnant)
- n) Nigerian political system has been cash and carry (influence of money)

The highlighted words such as 'kolanut', 'stranger', 'stayed' and 'hears', each maintain their standard English meanings but also acquire additional ones into the English lexicon. 'Kolanut' for instance refers to the seed of a tree that can be chewed and it is also medicinal but it's extended to mean 'bribe'.

'Stranger' which refers to a person you don't know and extended to mean 'visitor', a 'visitor' could also mean stranger but extended to mean someone though an indigene of a particular place but knows nothing about his locality.

She has not seen her period (means she has not experienced her menstrual circle or she is pregnant).

This assertion that the Nigerian political scene is cash and carry (means influence of money in Nigerian politics where it is exclusive for the rich).

The coinage, Nigerian economy is dollarised means the Nigerian economy is depended on the exchange rate of a Dollar to Naira

Japa syndrome refers to desire by some Nigerian youths to seek for greener pastures outside the country

Epileptic power supply – means the state of incessant power fluctuations in Nigeria

I have bought I passed my neighbour (refers to a small generator used in power supply when there is no public power supply)

On the whole, within Nigerian English are loan words, peculiar word coinages, proverbs, etc that attract different meanings based on the speech environment but despite these differences, the speakers still achieved mutual intelligibility in their speeches.

From the examples shown in this work, it is clear that the Nigerian English has been conceptualised to acquire the socio-cultural experience of the speakers of English in Nigeria where English according to Kachru in his forward to Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas (1995) is no more a guest in the linguistic ecology of West Africa, but has become an integral part of the linguistic family. It is obvious from the findings that Nigerians have invested English with cultural power in order to meet their communicative need in the language (Edem 2015, 2018).

In other words, most of the expressions in the indigenous languages used in the sampled text, have found relevance even in the context of English usage in Nigerian situation. This assertion has further lends credence to the plethora of other scholarly works on the lexical “domestication” of English in Nigeria. It goes further to affirm that although speakers of English the world over are understandably facing some challenges occasioned by the norm-breaking rules, peculiar word coinages, influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the target language, these challenges are not enough to dwarf or impede the international intelligibility and acceptability of the Nigerian variety of English being a subset of the new Englishes. This is so because it was created to meet the communication needs of the new environment (Edem 2018, 2023, Tunde-Awe, 2014) but it is still in communion with its ancestral home and has not substantially departed from the standard British English (SBE)

Summary/Conclusion

This paper has reiterated the importance of Nigerian English variety in meeting the communication needs of most Nigerians and acknowledges some of the challenges the new additions into the English Lexicon possess to adherents of the standard British rules. The work agrees that the vital role which the new variety plays in the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu is an added advantage in the wake or renewed “interest” for international intelligibility and public acceptability. It is identified in this paper that if we give proper attention to a standard Nigerian English since Nigerian variety is still in communion with the core aspects of the Standard British English, it is capable of addressing the problems or pessimism of international intelligibility and acceptability.

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