

Interdental Fricative Substitution in Nigerian English: An Orthographic Analysis of Twitter/X Posts

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Abstract

This study examines how the substitution of the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, a well-documented feature of Nigerian English pronunciation, is represented orthographically in informal Twitter/X posts. Nigerian English speakers typically realise /ð/ as [d] and /θ/ as [t], since these sounds are absent from the phonemic inventories of most Nigerian indigenous languages. Using a qualitative descriptive design, this study analyses fourteen publicly accessible Twitter/X posts and replies, purposively sampled for non-standard spellings that reflect this substitution, such as *dis* for *this*, *dat* for *that*, and *ting* for *thing*. The analysis reveals that the substitution is represented consistently across word-initial demonstratives and function words, with occasional variation, including a labiodental realisation in *nofin* for *nothing*, and instances of variation between standard and substituted spellings within the same post. The study argues that Twitter/X orthography functions as a written record of a well-established phonological process in Nigerian English, extending previous research that has focused mainly on spoken data. The findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the relationship between Nigerian English phonology and computer-mediated writing.

Keywords: *interdental fricatives, Nigerian English, orthographic representation, Twitter/X, phonological substitution, computer-mediated communication*

Introduction

The interdental fricatives /θ/, as in *think*, and /ð/, as in *this*, are among the most challenging sounds for Nigerian speakers of English. These sounds are rare cross-linguistically and are largely absent from the phonemic inventories of Nigerian indigenous languages, including Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. As a result, Nigerian English speakers typically substitute /ð/ with the alveolar stop [d] and /θ/ with the alveolar stop [t], a process known in the wider phonological literature as *th-stopping*. This substitution is one of the most frequently documented features of Nigerian English phonology, and studies using recorded speech and film dialogue have consistently confirmed it as a stable and widespread pattern across social and regional groups. While this substitution has been well studied in spoken Nigerian English, far less attention has been paid to how it surfaces in informal digital writing. Twitter/X, a microblogging platform on which Nigerian users post and reply publicly in real time,

provides an unusually direct written record of this phonological process. When Nigerian users write *dis* for *this*, *dat* for *that*, or *ting* for *thing*, they are not making random spelling errors; they are transcribing, in writing, the same substitution long documented in their spoken English.

This study investigates how the substitution of interdental fricatives is represented orthographically in Nigerian Twitter/X posts. It examines the specific spelling forms through which this substitution is realised and considers what patterns of variation and consistency emerge in this informal written data. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing field of research linking Nigerian English phonology with computer-mediated communication. To achieve this purpose, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What orthographic forms represent the substitution of /ð/ with [d] in Nigerian Twitter/X posts?
2. What orthographic forms represent the substitution of /θ/ with [t] in Nigerian Twitter/X posts?
3. To what extent do Nigerian Twitter/X users exhibit variation between standard and substituted spellings within the same post?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the orthographic representation of interdental fricative substitution in Nigerian Twitter/X posts. The data consist of naturally occurring, publicly accessible posts and replies collected from Twitter/X, including posts by Nigerian public figures and Nigerian focused accounts. Using purposive sampling posts containing non-standard spellings that reflect the substitution of /ð/ with [d] or /θ/ with [t] were selected for analysis. Such forms include *dis* (*this*), *dat* (*that*), *ting* (*thing*), and *tinna* (*thing*, with an added vowel). To ensure ethical compliance, all personal identifiers, including usernames, handles, and profile photographs, were removed from the dataset. The collected data were analysed qualitatively through descriptive linguistic analysis. Each identified form was examined to determine which interdental fricative it substitutes, the alveolar or labiodental sound used in its place, and its position within the word. Findings are presented through illustrative examples and analytical descriptions to reveal the orthographic patterns underlying interdental fricative substitution in Nigerian Twitter/X posts.

Review of Related Literature

The phonology of Nigerian English has been extensively documented since Jowitt's (1991) foundational account, and the substitution of interdental fricatives is among its most consistently reported features. Jowitt observed that Nigerian English pronunciation departs systematically from Received Pronunciation at the level of certain consonants, including the interdental fricatives, which are frequently replaced by their nearest alveolar equivalents. Simo Bobda's (1995) description of Nigerian English phonology found that /θ/ and /ð/ are commonly realised as [t] and [d] respectively, such that there is no phonetic distinction between *tin* and *thin*, or

between *dose* and *those*, in the speech of most Nigerian English speakers. This absence of the interdental fricatives in the phonemic inventories of Nigerian indigenous languages is generally regarded as the underlying cause of the substitution.

Jibril's (1986) earlier sociolinguistic survey situates this substitution within a broader account of regional variation in Nigerian English, proposing that the country's English can be broadly divided into Northern and Southern varieties along ethnic and regional lines. This regional dimension is significant for the present study because it indicates that interdental fricative substitution, while widespread, may still interact with the ethnic and regional background of individual speakers, a possibility that purposively sampled Twitter/X data, drawn from users across different parts of Nigeria, is well placed to illustrate.

Subsequent studies have confirmed and extended this finding using different methods and data. Udofo's (2004) study of spoken Nigerian English found that /θ/ in *think* and *thigh* is realised as [t], while /ð/ in *that* is realised as [d], and identified level of education as a major factor influencing the degree of substitution. Akande's (2008) methodological study, which piloted a dialectal survey of the English of Nigerian university graduates, further established that Nigerian English is not phonologically uniform, and that consonantal variables such as the interdental fricatives can be systematically elicited and measured across different groups of educated speakers. This methodological groundwork was built upon a decade later by Fajobi and Akande's (2018) study of interdental fricative pronunciation among Yoruba speakers of English at a Nigerian university, which found that the voiced variable was significantly affected by the gender of the speaker while the voiceless variable was not, that the voiceless variable was significantly affected by level of education while the voiced variable was not, and that the position of the fricative within a word, whether initial, medial, or final, significantly affected the realisation of both variables. This last finding is particularly relevant to the present study, since the Twitter/X data examined here consist almost entirely of interdental fricatives in word-initial position.

Ehineni's (2016) and Anietie Udofia, et al's (2023) variationist study, based on data from Nigerian English films, similarly found that the interdental fricatives are frequently substituted with alveolar stops, and that this substitution is conditioned by social factors such as setting, education, and sex, alongside the linguistic factor of word type. Ehineni further found that social factors exert a stronger influence on the realisation of the interdental fricatives than linguistic factors, a conclusion that aligns with Fajobi and Akande's finding that gender and education significantly affect these variables. Taken together, these studies collectively establish that interdental fricative substitution is a stable, socially patterned feature of spoken Nigerian English rather than a random performance error.

This kind of substitution is not unique to Nigerian English. In their study of Cajun English in Louisiana, Dubois and Horvath (1998) found a comparative pattern in which speakers of Cajun French heritage substitute the interdental fricatives with alveolar stops, producing forms such as *dat* for *that* and *tink* for *think*. Their study

attributes this substitution to the absence of interdental fricatives in French, the substrate language of Cajun English speakers, a parallel to the substrate influence of Nigerian indigenous languages on Nigerian English. This cross-linguistic comparison suggests that interdental fricative substitution is a predictable outcome wherever English is learned by speakers whose first language lacks these sounds, and it strengthens the case for treating the Nigerian English pattern as a systematic linguistic process rather than a feature specific to one language community.

Despite this substantial body of research, existing studies of interdental fricative substitution in Nigerian English rely almost exclusively on spoken data, drawn from recorded interviews, films, read-aloud word lists, or elicited speech tasks. Fajobi and Akande (2018) closely related the most direct precedent for the present research, relied on the reading performance of informants rather than on spontaneous, naturally occurring language use. Comparatively little attention has been paid to how this substitution is represented in informal digital writing, where Nigerian English speakers frequently spell words as they pronounce them without the constraint of a prepared text. The present study addresses this gap by examining Twitter/X posts as a written record of interdental fricative substitution, extending the study of this phonological feature from spoken and read-aloud Nigerian English to spontaneous written Nigerian English.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives: substrate transfer theory, interlanguage theory, and the concept of phonological representation in computer-mediated communication. Substrate transfer theory, formulated by Weinreich (1953) in his foundational account of language contact, holds that when speakers acquire a second language, the phonological system of their first language shapes and constrains their production of unfamiliar sounds in the target language. Where the first language lacks a given phoneme, speakers typically substitute the nearest available sound from their own phonemic inventory. Since /θ/ and /ð/ are absent in the sound systems of most Nigerian indigenous languages, Nigerian English speakers substitute them with the alveolar stops [t] and [d], the nearest sounds available in their first language phonemic inventories. This process has been repeatedly documented as a defining feature of Nigerian English pronunciation since Simo Bobda's (1995) description.

The second perspective, Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory, holds that second language learners develop a systematic linguistic system of their own, governed by consistent internal rules rather than being a haphazard mixture of the first and target languages (Applied to the present data, interlanguage theory suggests that the alveolar substitutes [t] and [d], and the occasional labiodental substitute [f], are not performance errors but stable, rule-governed features of the systematic variety of English that Nigerian speakers have developed, a variety in which these substitutions are consistently produced across speakers, contexts, and now, as this study shows, across written posts as well.

The third perspective draws on Crystal's (2011) concept of phonological representation, which holds that computer-mediated writing frequently departs from

standard orthography to reflect the pronunciation of the writer rather than conventional spelling rules (Crystal, 2011). Read together, these three frameworks account for both the origin and the written manifestation of the pattern under study: substrate transfer theory explains why Nigerian English speakers produce [t] and [d] in place of /θ/ and /ð/, interlanguage theory explains why this substitution is systematic and rule-governed rather than erratic, and the concept of phonological representation explains why this substitution, rather than the standard spelling, appears in informal Twitter/X writing.

Results and Discussion

4.1 Substitution of /ð/ with [d]: “Dis” for “This”

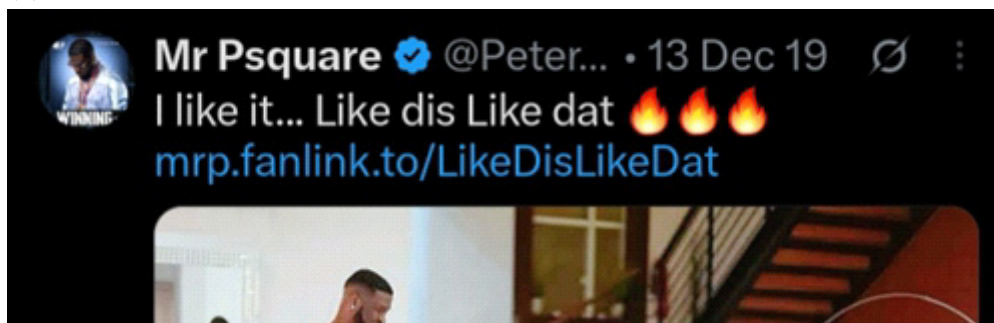
The most frequent form in the data is *dis*, the substituted spelling of the demonstrative *this*. This form illustrates the direct replacement of the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ with the voiced alveolar stop [d], while the rest of the word remains unchanged.

- (1) *Pls guys, who knows about dis man? What did he stand for? Who him resemble? I wan check smtin.*



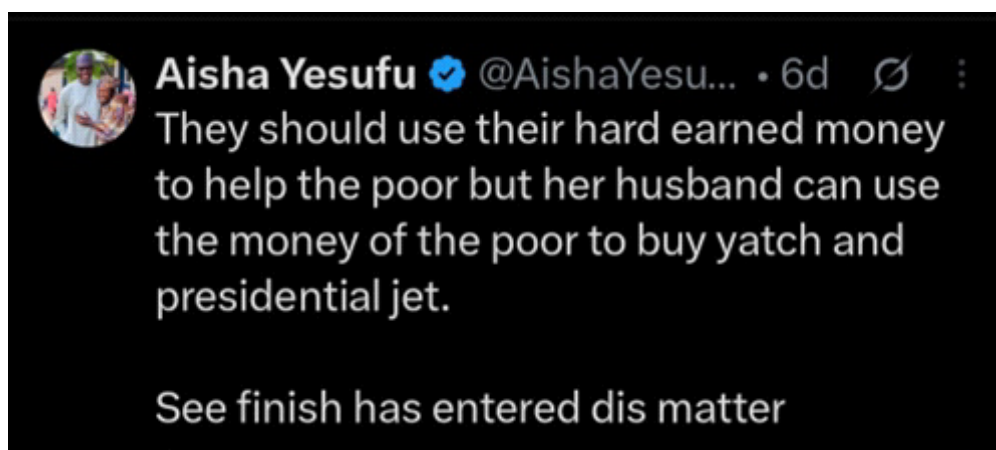
Screenshot 1: Twitter/X post by Charly Boy Area Fada

In example (1), the user substitutes *dis* for *this* in a question addressed to other users. The standard form begins with /ð/; in Nigerian English, this sound is regularly realised as [d], producing the pronunciation [dis]. The spelling *dis* captures this pronunciation directly, replacing only the initial letter while preserving the rest of the word. This word-initial position is significant in light of Fajobi and Akande's (2018) finding that the position of an interdental fricative within a word significantly affects its realisation; the demonstrative *this* places /ð/ in initial position in almost every example in this dataset, which may partly explain why the substitution appears so consistently across the sampled posts.

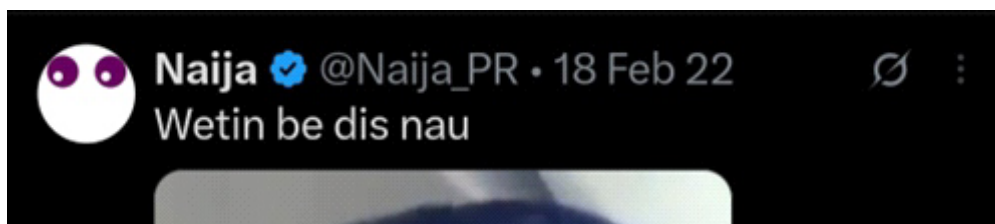
(2) *I like it... Like dis Like dat*

Example (2) is a promotional caption in which *dis* and *dat* both appear side by side. The presence of both substituted forms in a single short caption shows that the substitution is not restricted to one word but applies consistently to the whole class of demonstratives beginning with /ð/. The *dat* form in this example is discussed further in section 4.2.

(3) *They should use their hard earned money to help the poor but her husband can use the money of the poor to buy yacht and presidential jet. See finish has entered dis matter.*



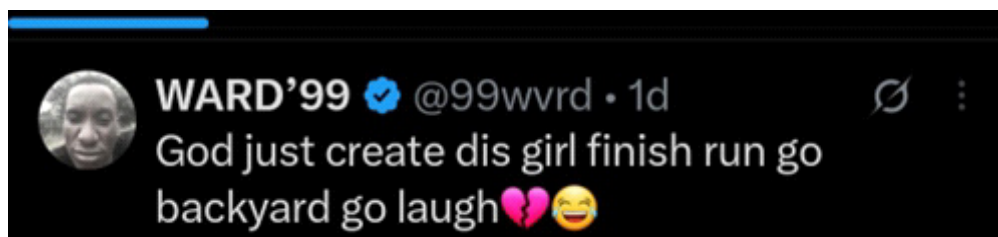
Screenshot 3: Twitter/X post by Aisha Yesufu

(4) *Wetin be dis nau*

Screenshot 4: Twitter/X post by Naija

Examples (3) and (4) show the same substitution operating in longer and shorter posts respectively. In both cases, *dis* functions as a demonstrative modifying a noun (*dis matter*, *dis nau*), confirming that the substitution applies regardless of sentence length or the formality of the topic being discussed. Example (3) is particularly instructive because it is embedded in an otherwise fully standard sentence discussing a serious political matter, while example (4) is a short, informal exclamation. The presence of the same substituted form across this range of registers supports the interlanguage view that *dis* is not a marker of casualness alone but a stable phonological feature that surfaces regardless of the topic or tone of the post.

(5) *God just create dis girl finish run go backyard go laugh*



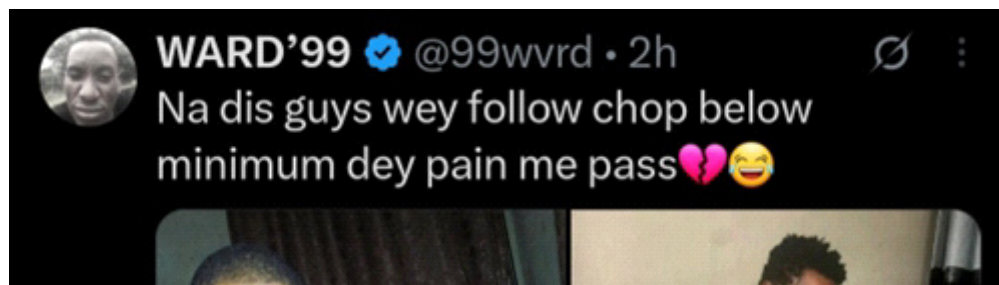
Screenshot 5: Twitter/X post by WARD'99

(6) *Una still remember dis Togo girl wey fame do view once that year?*



Screenshot 6: Twitter/X post by Szymanski

(7) *Na dis guys wey follow chop below minimum dey pain me pass*



Screenshot 7: Twitter/X post by WARD'99

Examples (5), (6), and (7) further confirm the pattern across different users and contexts. Each post combines *dis* with other Nigerian Pidgin English markers, such as *wey* and *dey*, showing that interdental fricative substitution regularly co-occurs with other recognised features of Nigerian Pidgin English in the same stretch of writing. This co-occurrence is consistent with Jibril's (1986) observation that Nigerian English varies along regional and ethnic lines; although the ethnic background of the users in examples (5) through (7) may not be able to be determined from public post data, the consistent pairing of *dis* with Pidgin markers such as *wey* suggests that the substitution is embedded within a wider system of informal Nigerian usage rather than occurring as an isolated spelling choice.

(8) *For dis life! Just dey do your ting.*



Screenshot 8: Twitter/X post by Wizkid

(9) *Abt to make a fuji song!...pasuma gat nofin on dis one...lol...*



Screenshot 9: Twitter/X post by Wizkid

(10) Mom called dis morn nd said... “heard u got a head on sat” nd i paused for like a min then she screamed “AYO!!! the award”....lmao..love her!

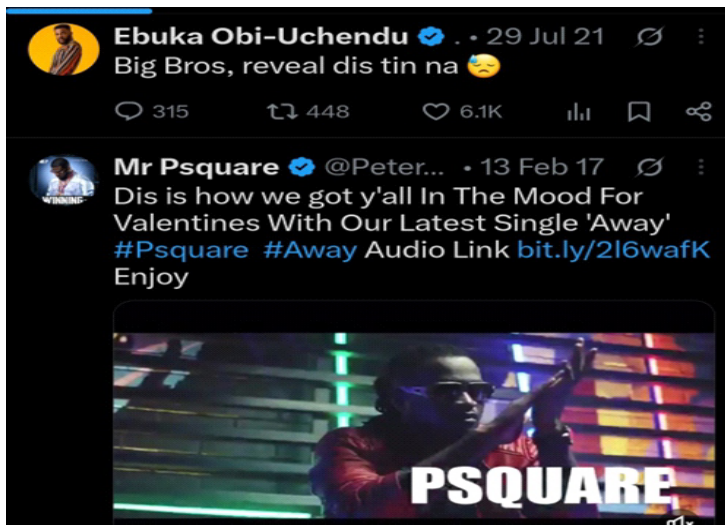


Screenshot 10: Twitter/X post by Wizkid

Examples (8), (9), and (10) show *dis* occurring in first-person narrative posts, all three of which are attributed to the same public figure, the musician Wizkid, and span roughly seven years of posting activity from 2011 to 2018. The recurrence of the same substituted form for several years, in posts on unrelated topics ranging from everyday commentary to music promotion, indicates that this is a stable feature of the user's written idiolect rather than a one-off spelling choice. Example (10) is particularly notable because the same post also contains the standard spelling *the* in *the award*, showing that the same user can produce both the standard and the substituted form of the interdental fricative within a single post, a pattern discussed further in section 4.5. Example (8) also contains *ting* for *thing*, discussed in section 4.3, and example (9) contains *nofin* for *nothing*, discussed in section 4.4.

(11) Big Bros, reveal dis tinna

(12) Dis is how we got y'all In The Mood For Valentines With Our Latest Single 'Away'



Screenshot 11: Twitter/X posts by Ebuka Obi-Uchendu and Mr Psquare

Examples (11) and (12), drawn from the same screenshot, show that the substitution occurs regardless of sentence position. In example (12), *Dis* begins the sentence in place of *This*, demonstrating that the substitution applies even in capitalised, sentence-initial position, and is therefore not limited to casual mid-sentence use. This is a meaningful observation given Ehineni's (2016) finding that formality of style significantly affects the realisation of the interdental fricatives in speech; example (12) is a promotional announcement, arguably one of the more formal or public-facing post types in the dataset, yet it shows no accommodation toward the standard spelling. This suggests that, at least in this written medium, the substitution persists across levels of formality more consistently than Ehineni's spoken-data findings might predict. Example (11) also contains the form *tinna*, discussed further in section 4.3.

Taken together, the twelve instances of *dis* identified across examples (1) through (12) make it the single most frequent substituted form in the dataset, appearing more than twice as often as *dat*, which is discussed in the next section. Since *this* is a high-frequency function word in English discourse, its repeated appearance in substituted form across eight different Twitter/X accounts indicates that the substitution is not confined to a small number of idiosyncratic users but is widely distributed across the platform.

4.2 Substitution of /ð/ with [d]: “Dat” for “That”

Alongside *dis*, the data also show frequent substitution of *that* with *dat*. As with *dis*, this form replaces the initial /ð/ with [d], while the rest of the word is unchanged.

(13) *Man don't care abt all dat.*



Screenshot 12: Twitter/X post by Wizkid

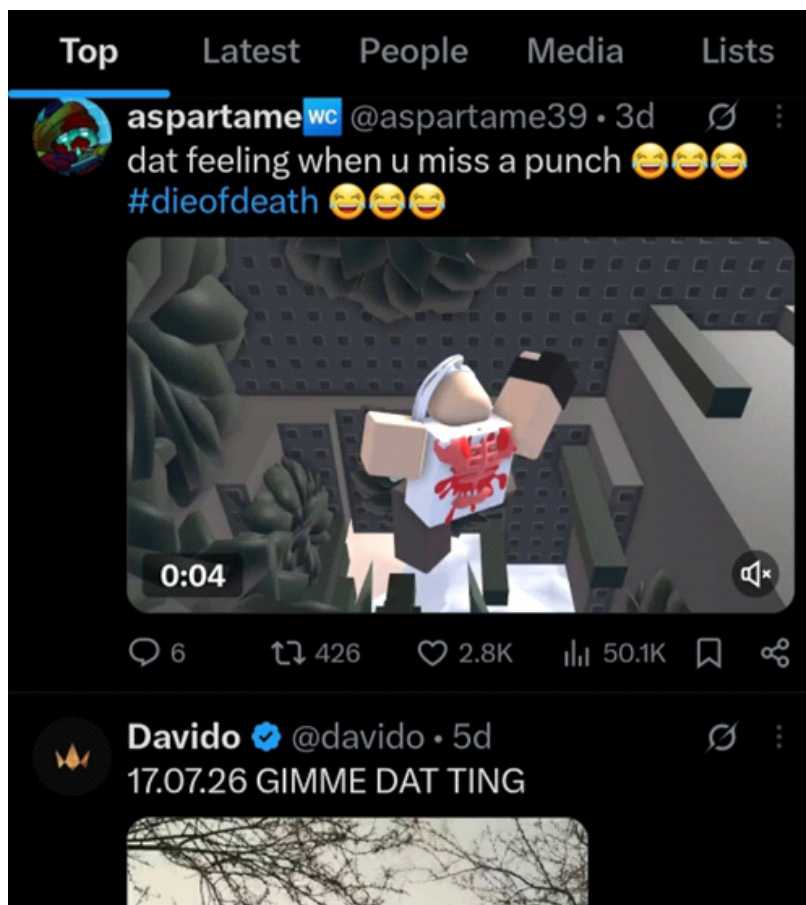
(14) *this gimme dat thing song walahi e dey carry me reach there*



Screenshot 13: Twitter/X post by richard

(15) *dat feeling when u miss a punch*

(16) 17.07.26 GIMME DAT TING



Screenshot 14: Twitter/X posts by aspartame and Davido

Examples (13) through (16) show *dat* functioning in different grammatical roles, as a determiner in *all dat* and *dat feeling*, and as an emphatic pronoun in *gimme dat thing* and *gimme dat ting*. The consistency of the substitution across these different grammatical functions indicates that it is governed by the phonological shape of the word rather than by its grammatical role in the sentence. Example (14) also retains the standard spelling *this* earlier in the same post, a point discussed in section 4.5, and example (16) contains *ting* for *thing*, discussed in section 4.3.

The five instances of *dat* identified here, compared with the twelve instances of *dis* discussed in section 4.1, suggest that the substitution is somewhat more frequent for *this* than for *that* in this dataset, although the sample is too small to establish this as a general tendency in Nigerian English writing rather than a feature of the particular posts sampled. What the data do allow is a clear qualitative observation: in every case where *that* appears with an interdental fricative in the underlying pronunciation, the corresponding Twitter/X spelling substitutes [d] for /ð/ without exception. Example

(15), *dat feeling*, is especially notable because it opens a post that has otherwise achieved considerable engagement, with several thousand likes recorded on the screenshot, indicating that the substituted spelling did not affect the post's reach or reception among readers. This supports the view that *dat* is read by Nigerian Twitter/X users as a fully acceptable, unmarked written form rather than as a mistake.

4.3 Substitution of /θ/ with [t]: “Ting” and “Tinna” for “Thing”

The data also contain evidence of the substitution of the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ with the voiceless alveolar stop [t]. This appears in the word *thing*, which is respelled as *ting* in examples (8) and (16), and as *tinna* in example (11).

In example (8), *ting* for *thing* shows the same alveolar substitution found in *dis* and *dat*, but applied to the voiceless member of the interdental pair, producing [tɪŋ] in place of [θɪŋ]. Example (16) shows the identical substitution in the phrase *gimme dat ting*, where both interdental fricatives in the underlying phrase *give me that thing* are substituted in the same short utterance, produced by Davido, a different public figure from the Wizkid posts discussed in section 4.1. This cross-user consistency reinforces the conclusion that the [t] and [d] substitutions are not properties of one individual's writing habits but of the wider Nigerian English speech community that these Twitter/X users represent. Example (11) shows a further development of this pattern in *tinna*, in which the alveolar substitution [t] is combined with an added final vowel, producing a two-syllable form. This kind of vowel addition, sometimes described as vowel epenthesis, is a recognised feature of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin English pronunciation, typically applied to consonant clusters or word-final consonants that are less common in the phonotactics of Nigerian indigenous languages. Its presence alongside the interdental substitution in *tinna* suggests that the two processes, interdental substitution and vowel epenthesis, operate independently of each other but can combine within a single word without apparent difficulty for either the writer or the reader, since the post attracted several hundred engagements without any indication that the spelling was misunderstood.

4.4 Variant Realisation of /θ/ with [f]: “Nofin” for “Nothing”

A less frequent but notable variant appears in example (9), where *nothing* is respelled as *nofin*. Unlike the alveolar substitution seen elsewhere in the data, this form replaces /θ/ with the labiodental fricative [f], and also omits the final velar nasal of *thing*, producing *nofin* rather than *nofing*. This labiodental substitution is generally referred to as th-fronting in the wider phonological literature and is less commonly associated with Nigerian English than the alveolar substitution found in *dis*, *dat*, and *ting*, which the literature reviewed in this study, from Simo Bobda's (1995) account onward, consistently identifies as [t] and [d] rather than [f] and [v].

Two explanations for this variant are worth considering. The first is that it reflects genuine inter-speaker variation of the kind documented by Fajobi and Akande (2018), whose study found that individual factors such as gender and education significantly affect which realisation a given speaker produces; on this view, *nofin* may simply belong to a less common but still attested variant within the range of realisations available to Nigerian English speakers. The second explanation is that the omission of

the final nasal in *nofin* reflects a degree of playful or exaggerated informality on the part of this particular user, since the same post also contains other markers of casual, colloquial style, including the ellipsis punctuation and the exclamation *lol*. Under interlanguage theory, both explanations are compatible with the view that the substitution is systematic rather than erratic; whether *nofin* reflects a stable individual variant or a stylistic performance, it remains a rule-governed departure from the standard spelling rather than a random error. Its presence in the data indicates that interdental fricative substitution in Nigerian English writing is not entirely uniform, and that a small degree of variation exists in how individual users represent these sounds in writing.

4.5 Variation between Standard and Substituted Spellings

Two examples in the data show the same user producing both the standard and the substituted spelling of words containing an interdental fricative within a single post. In example (10), the user writes *the award* with the standard spelling *the*, while also writing *dis morn* earlier in the same post. In example (14), the user opens the post with the standard form *this* and then immediately follows it with the substituted form *dat* later in the same sentence.

This variation within the same short stretch of text suggests that the substitution is not a fixed inability to produce or spell the standard form. Rather, it points to the substitution functioning as a stylistic and phonological option available to the writer, one that may be selected or bypassed depending on factors such as emphasis, spontaneity, or the specific word involved. This pattern is consistent with variationist findings in spoken Nigerian English, where the realisation of the interdental fricatives has been shown to vary according to style and context rather than applying categorically in all cases. Ehineni's (2016) finding that formality significantly affects the realisation of the interdental fricatives in speech, and Fajobi and Akande's (2018) finding that word position significantly affects their realisation, together suggest a plausible explanation for the pattern in examples (10) and (14): a single post may contain more than one linguistic environment for the interdental fricatives, and a Nigerian English user's underlying variable system may simply select different outcomes in different environments within the same utterance, exactly as it would in spoken discourse.

This variability also has a methodological implication for the present study. Because the data were sampled purposively for posts already containing a substituted spelling, this study cannot estimate what proportion of Nigerian Twitter/X posts overall contain the substitution, nor can it estimate how often individual users alternate between standard and substituted spellings across their wider posting history. What the analysis in sections 4.1 through 4.5 does establish is that the substitution is attested, systematic in its phonological patterning, and capable of coexisting with the standard spelling within the output of the same writer, all of which are consistent with treating it as a stable feature of written Nigerian English rather than as an error to be corrected.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the substitution of the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, a well-documented feature of Nigerian English pronunciation, is represented

orthographically in Nigerian Twitter/X posts. The analysis of fourteen publicly accessible posts confirmed that this substitution is represented consistently in writing, most frequently through *dis* for *this* and *dat* for *that*, and less frequently through *ting* and *tinna* for *thing*. These findings confirm that Nigerian Twitter/X users write the interdental fricatives the way they pronounce them, extending a substitution long documented in spoken Nigerian English into informal digital writing. The data also revealed a minor variant realisation, *nofin* for *nothing*, and cases in which the same user produced both the standard and the substituted spelling within a single post, indicating that the substitution operates as a variable stylistic choice rather than a fixed rule. This study demonstrates that Twitter/X orthography serves as a written record of a well-established phonological feature of Nigerian English. Far from constituting careless spelling, the substitution of interdental fricatives in this data is systematic and consistent with decades of research on Nigerian English pronunciation, extending the study of this phonological feature from spoken to written contexts and contributing to the growing body of scholarship on Nigerian English and computer-mediated communication.

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