

The Semantics of '*It Is Well*' in Nigerian English

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A paper presented at the First Ibom Interational Conference on African Literature and the English Language held at Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus from 18 to 21st April, 2023.

Abstract

This paper investigates the contexts in which 'it is well' is used in Nigerian English. Fifty final year students of the Department off English, University of Uyo were given ten contexts and asked to identify which of them could attract the comment clause it is well'. The analysis was done using simple percentages and insights from Chomsky's 1986 Internalized Semantics Theory. While some of the senses identified may readily be accessible to the speakers of English because they are basic and literal, some others, such as its use to convey resignation, acceptance, the end of a discussion, an expression of sympathy, etc. could pose problems for non-Nigerians because their senses anchored in the Nigerian sociolinguistic and pragmatic contexts. The study shows that its use is related to the cultural and religious beliefs of Nigerians. The paper proposes that such differences in usage be recognized, respected and accepted.

Keywords: *Semantics, Contexts, Nigerian English, Socio-linguistics, Pragmatics, Internalized semantics.*

Introduction

It is well is an expression that has recently become incorporated into Nigerian English due to the increased religious consciousness of Nigerians which has made them develop a philosophical attitude to the kind of life that the Nigerian society offers them. For instance, saying *it is well* to a bereaved person is strange as such a situation should attract sympathy in the Nigerian culture *It is well* has been described as "a phrase Nigerians have tacitly adopted as a philosophical mantra of coming to terms with the daily encumbrance of living in their own country radionigeria.gov.ng/2023/02/09. In Standard British English it does not occur on its own but is followed by a prepositional phrase as in "*it is well with you. It is well with my soul etc'* to mean it is all right or it is in order.

Nigerian English, also known as Nigerian Standard English, is a dialect of English spoken in Nigeria. Based on British English, the dialect contains various loanwords and collocations from the native languages of Nigeria, due to the need to express concepts specific to the culture of the nation. After Nigeria's independence, in 1960, the parliament had to retain the English language as Nigeria's official language because of the multiethnic and multilingual nature of the country and because none of the ethnic groups was ready to forego its own language and accept another as a national or official language. In Nigerian English, Semantics is a reflection of the local languages and their sociocultural values in the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. Semantic features represent the basic conceptual components of meaning for any lexical item. Semantic features in linguistics help to explain how words that share certain features may be members of the same semantic domain. Correspondingly, the contrast in meanings of words is explained by diverging semantic features. In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that studies meaning. Semantics can address

meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, or larger units of discourse. It also explains meanings of utterances, nonverbal, cultural and stylistic meanings (Udofot 1998, p.7).

The expression, It is well may have originated from 2 Kings 4:26 when the Shunammite woman whose son was lying dead was asked whether all was well with her and she answered, "All is well." The expression is also the theme of a few inspirational songs to emphasis the assuring message of Divine intervention during trying times. In Nigeria, collective frustrations with misgovernance have taken the phrase to a generic multi-purpose level to comfort and console the masses during trials and tribulations with the prospect of a bright future. The clause is now a rallying mantra to enable the masses to adapt or adjust rather than confront the dynamics of injustice that tend to take a massive physical and mental toll. It expresses empathy, sympathy, and fellow feeling when suffering proves seemingly unbearable. (cf Kabir Babatube 2023), This paper takes a look at the Nigerian situation and investigates the circumstances that necessitate the use of *it is well*, the Nigerian meanings attached to the utterance and the sociocultural factors that trigger its utterance.

Research Procedure

The data for the study were collected from questionnaires administered to fifty final year students of the Department of English, University of Uyo who were selected using a simple random sampling technique from a population of 130 students of the final year class. The respondents were given ten contexts to identify the ones where they would use the comment clause, it is well and the following results were obtained:

Presentation of Data

| S/N | Context | It is well | Percentage | Other expressions | Percentage |
|-----|---|------------|------------|--|------------|
| 1. | When telling myself/others to accept my/their fate. | 40 | 80 | 10 – be strong in the Lord/what cannot be avoided must be endured. | 20 |
| 2. | On receiving good news/report | 40 | 80 | 20 Praise the Lord | 20 |
| 3. | When offering comfort to others | 45 | 90 | 5 The Lord is your Strength/ take heart | 10 |
| 4. | When one is bereaved | 30 | 60 | 20 Accept my sympathy/ The Lord is your strength | 40 |
| 5. | When faced with frustration/ suffering and an unbearable situation that one cannot change | 40 | 70 | 20 Jesus is Lord/ may God's will be done. | 20 |
| 6. | To mock or include somebody | 0 | 0 | 50 Serves you right/ you are on your own | 100 |
| 7. | When something good or successful is reported | 45 | 90 | 5 Praise God | 10 |
| 8. | When one is bitterly disappointed in one's plan | 40 | 80 | 10 Satan is a liar | 20 |
| 9. | When one is informed of a failure in one's degree examination | 35 | 70 | 15 let it please God | 30 |
| 10. | One's fiancée/fiancé calls off one's/wedding | 40 | 80 | 10 The enemy has done this. | 20 t |

Analysis of Data

The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results show that the origin of the clause in Nigerian English is the Bible and the deep belief in God as the doer and giver of all things, good or bad. The results also reveal that the clause performs interpersonal functions: it is employed to offer comfort, indicate resignation, show acceptance of unpleasant situations, amongst other functions. The study shows that the use of *it is well* is related to the cultural and religious beliefs of Nigerians. This is in consonance with the thesis of I-semantics (Chomsky 1986) which has it that

when people communicate using language they do not communicate about the world per se but about the world as understood by humans. The objects to which humans refer are therefore not objects outside their knowledge but are objects that exist in human's conception of the world. This means that what does not exist for a particular person or people does not feature in their speech and has no meaning for them (Udofot 1998 p.136).

In Table 1, No. 1 above 80% of the respondents selected; 'it is well' in situations where things happen and they tell themselves or others to accept their fate showing resignation while 20% 'selected: *be strong in the Lord/what cannot be avoided must be endured* showing their deep belief in a higher entity that controls the affairs of humans. In Nos. 2 and 7, 80% of the respondents chose it is well in the context of receiving good news while 20% wrote: praise the Lord. In No 3 90% gave *it is well* when offering comfort while only 10% gave: *The Lord is your strength/ Take heart* as what they would likely say when comforting someone whereas in the Nigerian situation the most likely utterance in a situation of comforting someone is an utterance that will translate to I am sorry/ hold yourself together/ Take heart do not lose hope. NO 4 gives a situation of bereavement and 60% chose *it is well* while 40% chose: *Accept my sympathy I the Lord is your strength* as against sorry which is the Nigerian thing to say. The situations in Nos. 5 and 8 are situations of extreme frustration and in each case 80% of the respondents chose *It is well* while 20% wrote comments such as *Jesus is Lord/ May God's will be done/ Satan is a liar* also showing trust in God and resignation.

NO 6 was the only option where nobody chose *it is well*. That was a situation where it is used to mock or ridicule someone as in Unuabonah and Kupolati's (2023) study. None of the respondents suggested *it is well* for that situation. They rather suggested: *Serves you right /you are on your own* as the comments they would likely make in such a situation Nos 9 and 10 present situations of disappointments such as failing an examination and a planned wedding being called off. In each situation, the majority chose *It is well* as the appropriate comment in the situation while the minority: 30% in No9 and 20% in NO 10 suggested other alternatives: *Let it please God in NO 9 and the enemy has done this*, in No10. These also show that religion has become the Nigerian opium which helps them to put up with frustrations and disappointments, This stresses the fact that the Nigerian Christians' conception of the world nowadays is rooted in their Christian beliefs more than their cultural beliefs and according to I-Semantics the meanings they attach to objects and situation are those that exist in their beliefs and conception of the world

Discussion of Data

Sociolinguistic and Semantic contexts

"It is well" expresses the exact opposite of its ordinary meaning to assure the aggrieved to always endeavour to do their best in coping with untoward circumstances .In the current situation in Nigeria, It is a post-electoral booster for defeated politicians to ensure better luck next time and a tonic for Youth Corp Members to confront the dilemma of

depleted funds and rejection letters of postings at the same time! It consoles hard workers who are often underpaid or people who have had some traumatic experiences to realize that others are worse off. It turns the tragedy of bereavement into divine acceptance of the inevitability of mortality as a comforting assurance that God is always in control. It checks the masses' anger against the astonishing greed, graft and vanity of the mundane arrogance of the political class despite their abysmal failures in government. "It is well" enables the masses to endure the tragic elements of the human condition, to overcome the fragility of human life and cope with the skewed scheme of things in which they are mere onlookers. The phrase offers psychological support to those who are unable to defend themselves against what Shakespeare described as 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes.'

The Human spirit and adversity

The phrase "it is well", is an inspirational example of how the human spirit can quickly overcome adversity and a restatement of human perseverance to rise above life's struggles with philosophical calmness and stoic equanimity. It downplays the reality of a hopeless situation and the apparent impotence of man in the face of adversity. It is an apathetic resignation to fate and affirmation of faith in the dispensation of providence. It is a potent rallying message of survival against workers of inequalities and is founded on widespread distrust of government and dissatisfaction. It is a subtle veto of disappointment with a disappointing system and the solace of those who do not have all the answers to the inseparable enticements and encumbrances of living in Nigeria. It compels man to seek divine deliverance when the hope of this world is gone. It is the protective talisman against competing vicissitudes that appear to have enveloped the world of man. If Nigeria cannot translate its putative leadership of the Black race into commensurate development, it is safe to conclude that all is well. As the comment clause is uttered with increasing regularity highly unlikely anywhere else, it does not necessarily mean all is well but emphasizes that although all is not well, it is expected that with faith and perseverance, all shall be well in the end. (Kabir Babatube 2023).

Semantic Description of *It is well*

Any word, phrase, sentence uttered in a particular situation is called an utterance. According to Lyons (1968, p.413) every utterance occurs in a particular spatio-temporal situation (a particular point in space and time). This includes the speaker, hearer, what they are doing at the time, other people and objects also present, shared beliefs and background knowledge of the speaker and hearer, conventions and presuppositions taken for granted by the speech community to which both the speaker and hearer belong. All these recall Firth's Context of Situation (Firth 1968, p177). If the context does not prescribe the occurrence of the utterance, the utterance is meaningful. If an utterance is mandatory in the situation where it is uttered, it is uninformative and therefore not meaningful. This explication depends on one of the most basic principles of semantics that 'meaning or meaningfulness implies choice' (Lyons 1977, p. 33). That is to say that if a certain utterance is the usual thing to say in a particular situation such as *hello* on picking up a phone to receive a call; *good morning* on seeing somebody in the morning or *pleased to meet you* on being introduced to someone, such an utterance gives no information and is therefore meaningless. All that can be said about such utterances in a semantic description is that they are mandatory utterances used in particular situations. On the contrary, if such an utterance like *how do you* which attracts the same response- *how do you do* in British English can attract other responses as in Nigerian English such as: *fine, it is hard or so* so instead of *how do you do*, and the speaker can choose any of the alternatives instead of *how do you do*, then any of the alternatives is meaningful because it gives information to the hearer.

The Nigerian utterance *It is well*, as shown above, is an utterance used in the contexts identified above. In each case, there are alternative expressions which are used instead of *It is well* such as ; *Accept my sympathy, Sorry, Be strong in the Lord* etc. in the context of bereavement or offering comfort to someone, which communicate different meanings. It is not a mandatory or specially prescribed utterance in the identified contexts but has equally meaningful alternatives. A semantic description of the utterance therefore is that it is an utterance recently coined in Nigeria out of frustration and hardship which characterize the social, political and economic situation of the Nigerian society. It portrays the resilient spirit of Nigerians who prefer to resign themselves to situations they cannot change but must live with and hope for a change.

Summary and Conclusion

The context of the Nigerian English Utterance *It is well* have been identified and discussed. It has been shown that the utterance which originates from the bible must have arisen from the deep religious faith and beliefs of Nigerians and the frustrations they live with can be used to advise somebody to be resigned and look up to a higher being in times of difficulties and suffering; to convey comfort to one who is troubled or disappointed; to give consolation to the bereaved, to convey acceptance of difficult situations and to show contentment in successful situations and when a happy situation is reported. None of the respondents accepted that it can be used to mock or ridicule someone. The analysis was done using insights from Chomsky's Internalized Semantics Theory which equates meaning to ideas of objects and situation within the user's conception of the world.

The paper concludes that *It is well* is a recent expression which has come into the Nigerian English lexicon because of the religious beliefs of Nigerians, their resilient spirits and attempt to come to terms with the problems of living in the Nigerian society. The utterance has become an opium of the people struggling to come to terms with their frustrations and inability to change their situation and therefore decide to accept the inevitable and look forward to better days ahead. It is recommended that since this utterance is meaningful it should be accepted into the pragmatic usages in Nigerian English and possibly be included in the dictionary of Nigerian English Usage.

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