

## VARIANTS AND ERRORS IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH

Osinaike, Funmilola Omolara

The Gateway (ICT) Polytechnic, Saapade, Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author's Email: [babelloh@gmail.com](mailto:babelloh@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

*This paper discussed the varieties of the English Language in Nigeria. A brief history of English, the evolution of language in Nigeria and different classifications by scholars were discussed. The paper concluded with the future of Nigerian English and suggested recommendations on the variety to be picked as the standard for Nigerian English.*

**Key Words:** *English, Language, Variants, Errors, Nigerian*

### The Evolution of English in Nigeria

According to Awonusi (2004), most historians and analysts agree that it is not an easy task to date the beginning of the use of English in Nigeria. Historical records speculate that Anglo-Nigerian contact may date as far back as the 15th century when Portuguese sea-merchants and pirates, in their search for a new sea-route to India arrived at the West coast. Oyedola (1998) asserts that there is no record of the exact date the English Language came into Nigeria nor is there any conclusive evidence of its first speaker. Ogu (1992) also confirms this. He adds that the presumptions that the use of the language in Nigeria predates recorded instances of its use. Alabi (1999) stated that Nigeria's first contact with English must have been at some period before the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is on record that from 1553, English men paid very brief visits to the Nigerian coasts especially the ports of Benin and old Calabar and the type of communication which evolved between the English men and Nigerians was English based pidgin. African traders saw more need to learn European languages when slave trafficking increased tremendously in the 18th century with England as a major importer of slaves. Ogu (1992) stated that the Portuguese were the first people from Europe to set their foot on the West coast of Africa. They had to communicate with the natives who spoke different languages because they were more interested in commerce and attempts were made but it is not certain whether the natives learnt the Portuguese language or the Portuguese tried to learn the indigenous languages. The mixture of the indigenous languages with the Portuguese dialect of English gave rise to Pidgin. The growth of Pidgin English progressed tremendously when the English displaced the Portuguese in pepper trade. English therefore became the chief coastal trade language. It was from the early Portuguese contact that words such as 'palaver', 'wrapper, pikin, boku', emerged. The Portuguese realized early the importance of Lagos. They called the present Lagos "Logode Kuramo" from which comes the name 'Lagos'. The name 'kuramo' still survives at a location near Lagos.

After the abolition of the slave trade and the need to find an economic alternative, explorers began to penetrate into Nigeria beyond its coasts. They were followed by missionaries who preached the gospel and promoted trade. They built schools through which came the spread of English in Southern Nigeria especially in schools such as C.M.S Grammar school, Lagos in 1859 and Hope Waden Institute, Calabar. Freed slaves who could speak English served as interpreters for the missionaries. One of them is Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who later became a bishop. The freed slaves also served as clerks and teachers in established schools. Some Nigerians were also speaking English to assist the missionaries amid colonial masters who came to protect their trade and missionary activities. The government founded its schools alongside those of the missionaries, and the English language did spread in Nigeria through formal education. Conquest and colonization was another factor for the implantation of English in Nigeria. Lagos was conquered and annexed as a colonial territory of Britain during the reign of Oba Dosunmu in 1846. It formally marked the commencement of colonial rule. After taking hold of Lagos and the Yoruba land, the Eastern part of the country was also penetrated. Lord Lugard amalgamated the three Lagos colony, south and northern protectorates in 1914 and Lady Lugard gave the name 'Nigeria' from 'Niger area'.

The positive attitude of people, especially those in the southern part of the country has helped the language because of the policies of government backing it. This is due to the benefits that accrue to an individual that possessed a high degree of its mastery. Such benefits include white collar jobs. From the above, the evolution of the English language in Nigeria has been established. Due to the contact of the English language and the indigenous languages and cultures of Nigeria over time the standard British English gave rise to a variety of English called 'Nigerian English' that can cater for its cultural socio-linguistic needs. According to Jibril (1984) and Omolewa Jibril (1979), the history of the use of English in Nigeria dates back to the first part of the 19th century. That was the time of the great influx of colonisers and missionaries to the coast of West Africa, a specific instance being that of the arrival of missionaries at Badagry, Nigeria in 1842. Akinjobi (2004) says the historical situation which resulted in the nativisation of English in Nigeria today were derived from diaries, old letters and other documents of transaction between (Femi Akindele and Adegbite, 1999) the white men and the natives. Having given some views of different scholars on the evolution of the English language in Nigeria, other sources of implantation of the language include adventure, conquest and colonization as well as people's

attitude. Mungo Park, Richard and John Lander, Clapperton, Mary Slessor were people who opened the gate to the language in Nigeria. Mungo Park wanted to resolve the mystery behind the River Niger. He wanted to know its source and termination. He travelled to West Africa between 1795 and 1797. In 1805, he succeeded in establishing that River Niger flowed eastward and such adventures sowed the seed of English usage and probably prepared the ground for commerce and trade which provided notable avenues for interaction between Europeans and the indigenous people of West Africa.

### **Features of Nigerian English**

Nigeria English (henceforth referred to as NE), being a variety of the worldwide tally of varieties of English, has its own peculiar features or characteristics that distinguish it from other varieties of English like Ghanaian English, Indian English or Cameroun English. This is because it is a second language in Nigeria and it is learnt consciously; unlike our native languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Ibibio etc that we acquire sub-consciously. Consequently, according to Odeunmi (2006) "certain socio-cultural variables influence the variety of English we speak". Since realities and experiences peculiar to our communities are expressed in another language, certain differences from the Standard English are expected to occur. Differences of this nature have produced Nigerian-peculiar words such as 'introduction' (preliminary formal meeting of the families of would be husband and wife), 'bukateris' instead of 'cafeteria' etc. Nigerian English, which could also be referred to as expression of words that have a distinctive local Nigeria flavour which has been influenced by elements of transfer from the mother tongue. They remain grammatical and do not obscure intelligibility to the native speaker of English (Oyedola 1998). At the level of lexis, examples of NE coinages and importations from the indigenous languages (loan-words) are: 'go-slow' instead of 'traffic jam', 'cash-madam' for a 'rich woman', 'academician' for 'scholar', 'afternoon meal' for 'lunch', 'cow-meat' for 'beef', 'disvirgin' for 'deflower'.

Ajani (2007) stated that transfers are from the local languages like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and other areas like music, clothing, indigenous foods, traditional religious beliefs, local institutions etc. Some of these loan-words do not have equivalents in Standard English. For example, 'Oba', 'Obi', 'Emir', 'Sultan' which are traditional titles, 'Buba', 'Aso-oke', 'Sanyan', 'Agbada', 'Dansiki', 'Aso-ebi', 'Babanriga', 'lappa', which are traditional clothes in Nigeria, 'Dodo', 'Suya', 'Eko', 'Amala', 'Ogbono', 'Obokun', 'Oku-eko', 'Tuwo', which are local foods in Nigeria, 'Gangan', 'Agidigbo', 'Juju', 'Apala', are from music in Yoruba land. At the semantic level, semantic extensions abound in NE, especially in relationship vocabulary. The word 'father' or 'mother' could be used both for one's biological father or mother and any elderly person who is old enough to have one as a child. So also are words like uncle, auntie, brother, sister, cousin etc. The following words have been given different meanings apart from their Standard English meanings. For example; 'wash' instead of 'celebrate', 'drop' for 'alight', 'machine' for 'motorcycle', 'chase' for 'woo'. Other examples are clichés like 'nook and corner' instead of the Standard English 'nook and cranny', 'cut your coat according to your size' instead of 'cut your coat according to your cloth'.

At the syntactic level, features such as omission of articles, wrong use of prepositions and non-application of rules of concord, tense, voice etc. are observed. This is due to the fact that the nature of Nigerian English syntax presents a case of thinking in the first language and expressing the ideas in the second language. As a result of this, translation from the first into the second language occurs. This ends up in Nigerian English Structure and local idioms. For example; That boy he is very intelligent. Most NE expressions are English on the surface but have the mother-tongue underlying structures. E.g. You met me well, your legs are good. Sometimes, words are also reduplicated (repeated) for intensification and this is a grammatical device in Yoruba brought into English. For example; There are eggs and there are eggs. Same thing with prophets. Another feature of NE syntax is found in the inability to differentiate between modal verb of politeness and modal verb of auxiliary. In Standard English, the use of auxiliary is to show necessity while that of politeness is for permission or request (Oyedola 1998). For example: can you help me (modal verb), could you help me (politeness).

NE does not differentiate between spoken and written statement Standard English makes room for differences between speeches and written statements. For example; I can't go, 'I mustn't do it' are spoken but written as 'I cannot go', I must not do it in Standard English; but the former is used for spoken and written in NE. Sometimes two determiners or the same class occur together e.g. This is my pen (NE). This pen of mine. At the level of phonology, the NE has nineteen vowels and twenty-four consonants. The vowels are made up of 11 monothongs and 8 diphthongs. The consonants consist of 6 plosives, 9 fricatives, 2 affricatives, 3 nasals, 2 liquids and 2 semi-vowels (Odumuh 1993:25). This is at the level of the sound. Nigerian users of English (NE) cannot distinguish between the long vowels like /i:/, /:/, /:/, and short vowels like /i/, //, //, e.g. sit and seat, pull and pool. So also is the voiced and voiceless alveo-palataal fricative /s/ and /z/ and voiced palatal affricate /ts/ as in sick, shirt and church. This is due to the fact that some Nigerian language does not have some of these sounds e.g. /ts/. English is a stress-timed language and a syllable timed language like the Nigerian languages. Every syllable tends to be stressed in NE. For example clas'sify, rea'lise, tele'phone (NE) instead of 'classify, 'realize, 'telephone (SE). The syllable structure of SE is C<sup>0-3</sup>-V.C<sup>0-4</sup> while that of Nigerian languages is CV. The Nigerian user of English introduces a vowel between consonants. For example, 'bureedi' instead of 'bread'. Nigerian languages do not have consonant clusters like the SE, hence, the introduction of vowels.

### **Varieties and the Criteria for Classification**

The global spread of English as one of the far-reaching linguistic phenomena of our time is an undisputable fact. It is in this sense that we now have such terms as ‘New English’ which is often used to describe situations of other languages of the world coming in contact with the English language and then resulting in varieties of English with features peculiar to the language situation of these communities. Jowitt (1991) affirms the phenomenon-variation and so he describe a variety of a language as one of many general and complete language systems, each used by a substantial number of people and each possessing characteristics that distinguish it from other systems without requiring it to be classified as a different language. Varieties, according to Jowitt, can be classified according to different parameters-national (American English, British English, in a sense Nigerian English; though not yet verified) etc, regional, social etc. Explaining further, Jowitt posits that when varieties are to be considered in relation to one another, it may be necessary to introduce fresh distinctions such as ‘sub-variety’. At one level, American and British English are both varieties, and at another Standard British English, Scottish English, and Yorkshire English, are also varieties but in relation to British English, regarded as a variety, the latter three are sub-varieties. It is in line with this that this paper considers the sub-varieties that exist under the overall variety Nigerian English.

The earliest attempt at identifying-varieties of Nigerian English, as scholars has noted (Jowitt, 1991; Banjo, 1970; etc.) was made by Brosnahan (1958). Brosnahan’s four-level variety typology, drawn from observations in the southern part of the country, was based strictly on educational attainment. His variety I speakers are those with no formal education, who use pidgin English. Worthy of note is the argument of scholars like Omamor and Elugbe (1991) that the Nigerian Pidgin is not a variety of English but a distinct language with its own system. In counter-argument, Adetugbo (1978) and Bamiro (1991) still suggest that while a consideration of the Nigerian Pidgin as a variety of English may be unacceptable, it is still closely tied to Nigerian English. Brosnahan’s variety II users are those with only primary education completed. Variety III users are those with secondary education completed while variety IV is for those with university education completed. The educational parameter, according to Jowitt, is hypothetically more productive in the attempt at identifying varieties because the type of English spoken and written by Nigerians manifestly varies according to the level of general education. Brosnahan’s scheme, in Jowitt’s view, has some drawbacks because there are numerous factors which modify the degree of proficiency in English and which also serve to distort any simple procedure of correlation between it and formal education. It is possible as Jowitt has noted, for a primary school child as a result of his/her familiarity with English at home to be more proficient in English usage than a West African School Certificate (WASC) holder.

Subsequently, Banjo (1993) also did a classification based on what Jowitt refers to as purely linguistic criteria. Here groups of linguistic features are distinguished according to the degree of deviation which they manifest from standard British English. The classification is based on the extent of mother tongue transfers and approximation to a world standard. Banjo also identified four varieties his variety I is marked by the wholesale transfer of mother tongue (MT) features to English variety II is close to Standard British English (SBE) in syntax, but with strongly marked phonological and lexical characteristics. Variety III is close to SBE in syntax and semantics, similar in phonology, different in phonetic features and with some lexical peculiarities. His variety IV is identical to SBE in syntax, semantics, phonology and phonetics. Banjo adds to the scheme the sociolinguistic parameters of international intelligibility and social acceptability within Nigeria. As explained by Jowitt, Banjo’s variety II and III said to be socially acceptable in Nigeria while I and IV are not; they are stigmatized. Variety I is stigmatized because of the wholesale transfer of MT and variety IV because it is so close to British English and so it is felt or seen by the majority of Nigerians as un-Nigerian. Jowitt however, added that variety IV represents the speech of a very small number of those Nigerians who were either born, brought up or who spent a long time in Britain.

Bamgbose (1992) criticizes Banjo’s typology especially the inclusion of variety IV. His argument is that it does not arise in the same kind of circumstances as the other varieties. He goes further to fuse Brosnahan’s varieties II-IV with Banjo’s varieties I – III and his new set of varieties is thus correlated with both educational levels and linguistic features. Jowitt points out that three such varieties had earlier been proposed and examined by Adesanoye (1973, 1980) though hile Banjo-Bamgbose classification has started with Banjo’s phonological data, Adesanoye’s is based on written English. Thus Adesanoye identifies variety I with the average primary school leaver, the modern school pupil (phased out of the system) and low-grade workers, variety II with secondary school leavers, sixth-formers (also phased out of the system) and many university students, most magistrates and many journalists. His variety III represents the graduate class, most university lecturers, superior judges, administrators, editors, the more sophisticated authors, etc. Jowitt, reacting to the various variety classifications, however notes that for each of the parameters, there is no clearly defined and sharp demarcation and that what exists is a continuum and so segmentation can only be arbitrary. He therefore proposes a variety called popular Nigerian English (PNE). As pointed out by Banjo (1995), Jowitt’s PNE is an inclusive definition of Nigerian English. As quoted by Banjo he (Jowitt) suggests that ”the usage of every Nigerian user is a mixture of standard forms and popular Nigerian English forms which are in turn composed of errors and variants” He sets up a scale of varieties ranging from those heavily influenced by mother – tongue transfers to those approximating to standard English and at the same time correlates these generally with educational attainments. Close to the latter and of his scale is Near-Standard Nigerian English which is presumed to be the emerging Standard Nigerian English.

A notable attempt at a regional classification of Nigerian English is that which was done by Jibril (1982) in a PhD thesis but was later published in 1986. His classification was based on Nigerian spoken English. He recognizes two broad sub-varieties, he distinguishes between Basic Hausa English (BHE) and Sophisticated Hausa English (SHE) and within the southern sub-variety he distinguishes between Basic Southern English (BSE) and Sophisticated Southern English (SSE). He also recognizes the emergence of a Southern-Influenced Hausa English (SIHE). As explained by Banjo, Jibril makes a simple binary distinction between a basic variety and a sophisticated one. In Banjo's view Jibril's analysis makes it clear that the candidate for the standard variety has to be union of sophisticated Hausa and sophisticated southern varieties. The standard variety even after it has fully emerged, as explained by Jibril, will still be marked by northern and southern accents, however subtle.

## **Variations and Errors in Nigerian English**

### *Variations and Errors*

The usage of English by Nigerians is a mixture of standard forms and popular Nigerian English forms, which are in turn composed of errors and variants (Jowitt, 1991). It is pertinent at this point to distinguish between errors and variants since NE emerged as a product of the combination of NE and mother tongues (MT) in Nigeria. Some have misconstrued Nigerian English for error, but it is not. It is rather a variation which is quite different from error. Variation occurs when the linguistic item used is different from the standard item. In this sense, the non - standard item. While error is simply due to wrong learning which could result in inability to communicate and it is an imperfect language. Error is a non – standard English form that is unacceptable to educated Nigerian. It is the improper usage of English. Simple rules of lexis and sentence structure are disobeyed. There is no break of general rules of grammar in variation and it is justified on semantic ground. For example, there is variation in the ascription of meaning to kinship terms and address usage in standard English and NE. The example of kinship ties has already been discussed in the earlier parts of this paper. Since there is no break of general rules of grammar in variation, NE should be accepted as a variant. For the fact that it is acceptable among Nigerians and at the same time serves international intelligibility has differentiated it from institutionalized and vulgar errors.

Jowitt (1991) states that “variation means that in a certain linguistic context, use is made of an item different in certain respects from the standard item, so that the non – standard item is in a sense substituted for the standard item. He goes further to say that variation embraces both errors and variants. He asserts that “it is legitimate to speak of variations as errors where they are due to wrong learning and are generally regarded by educated people as errors. Some errors are attributed to mother tongue transfer e.g. I hear the smell of gas or to transfer from Pidgin e.g. ‘I for tell you that or Over-generalizations e.g. ‘I am go’ or the articulation of ‘b’ in word ending in –mb- e.g. tomb, bomb. Errors are corrected through comparison with standard forms and usage. They might be classified to their possible causes or their frequency of occurrence and the attitudes displayed to them by the language community. Idiosyncratic errors are those peculiar to an individual and characterizing his idiosyncratic dialect. They are most likely corrected by teachers, peers, and parents. They are mostly eliminated during early stage of the learning process. For example; “You must have refreshed since your reposting”, “Please progress your help”.

Common errors occur in the written and spoken English of large number of learners while vulgar errors show ignorance of fairly elementary rules e.g spelling errors like yours’ for yours, occasion for occasion, dining for dinning, leaving for living; and wrong addition of –ed to past tense forms or –ly to adverbs e.g He hitted me or He talks fastly. A variant is an idiomatic non-standard English form that is acceptable and used by most educated Nigerians, and is thus capable of becoming prescribed usage in Nigeria. A variant, unlike an error is not unacceptable once its meaning has been explained. An error is unacceptable to native users of English and to non-native users outside Nigeria. Examples of variants are ‘sorry’, ‘brother’, ‘(not) on seat’, and motor park (these are lexical variants). The peculiarly Nigerian use of ‘sorry’ or ‘brother’ breaks no general rules and is justified on semantic grounds. It is an adaptation that fills the ‘gap’ that exists because of differences between British and Nigerian culture. The link between errors and variants is that a variant was originally a deviant form regarded as an error which later became an institutionalized error and so widely accepted and later still achieved universal acceptance.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has given a brief history of the Standard English and its incursion into Nigeria through adventure, trade and commerce and missionary activities among others. It has also delved in reasons for varieties of NE, the varieties of NE as stated by different scholars and the criteria for classification of NE. Featured prevalent at various levels like the lexical, semantic etc, variations and errors were also discussed. It is pertinent to say that the NE has come to stay with Nigerians though, a standard of the NE is yet to evolve; but with further research, a compromise will be reached on which variety to be taken as the standard. The future of NE is guaranteed as its social acceptability increases among Nigeria and the reason for acceptability is not far-fetched. This is due to ability of NE (a variety of World English) to meet the linguistic and socio-cultural needs of Nigerians. The third variety given by Banjo (1991) is hereby suggested to be taken as the standard. If this is variety is codified and standardized, a status or function can be accorded to the SNE through policies by government. Writers will further embrace the trend and pace set by the likes of Achebe, Soyinka, Ekwense among others who have been writing using the English language to express their various culture. Dictionaries and textbooks could also be written in SNE and this will make it easy for the ‘Standard Variety of Nigeria English’ to

be taught in schools; and over time, the standard British hi (RP) could be dropped. A language academy should also be put in place to see the success and growth of the language so as to avoid its death.

### References

- Aje, Solomon (1999) Varieties of English. Studies and discourse in English Language. Eds. Olu Obafemi & Sola Babatunde. Ilorin. Haytee Press and Publishing Company Nigeria Limited. pgs 158-175
- Alabi, Victoria. (1999). The English Language in Second Language Contexts: The English Language in Nigeria studies and discourse in English. Eds. Olu Obafemi & Sola. Babatunde. Ilorin: Haytee Press and Publishing Company Nigerian Limited. 176-195
- Akindele, Femi & Adegbite, Wale. (1999). The Sociology and Politics of English in Nigeria: an introduction. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd.
- Onadeko, Tunde. (1999). Towards the eradication of homophone errors in secondary school learners. Oye. Ogun Journal of Arts 8: 18-25
- Jowitt, David. (1999). Nigerian English usage: an introduction. Lagos: Longman Oyedola, Seun. 1998. Perspectives on the English in Nigeria
- Ogu, Julius N. (1992). A Historical Survey of English and the Nigerian situation. Lagos. Kraft Books.
- Odumuh, A. E. (1993). Socio-linguistics and Nigerian English. Ibadan: Sam Bookman. Odeunmi, Akin. 2006. Meaning in English: an introduction. Ogbomosho: Critical Sphere.
- Adeyanju, Dele (ed). (2007). Socio-linguistics in the Nigerian context. Vol 1. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd. Chapter 1
- Akinjobi, A. A. (2004). A phonological investigation of vowel weakening and unstressed syllable obscuration in educated Yoruba English. Thesis. English, Arts. University of Ibadan.
- Ajani, Timothy. T. (2007). Is there indeed a Nigerian English? Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences. Vol 1
- Awonusi, Segun & Dadzie, A.B.K. (eds) (2004). Nigerian English Influences and Characteristics. Lagos Concept Publications. Chapters 5,9 & 17.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. (1995). English in the Nigerian Environment. New English: A West African Perspective. Eds. Ayo Bamgbose, Ayo Banjo, Andrew Thomas. Ibadan. Mosuro Publishers and Booksellers.
- Alo, M.A. (2004). Social Meaning in Nigerian English (Eds.) Kola Owolabi and Ademola. Dasyuva. Forms and functions of English and indigenous languages in Nigeria: A festchrift in honour of Ayo. Banjo. Group Publishers.
- Fakoya, Adeleke. (2004). A mediolect called Nigerian English. (Eds) Kola Owolabi & Ademola Dasyuva. Forms and functions of English and indigenous languages in Nigeria: A festchrift in honour of Ayo. Banjo: Group Publishers
- Adesanya, Festus. A. (2004). The English in Nigeria: the case of a vanishing model. (Eds ) Kola. Owolabi and Ademola Dasyuva. Forms and functions of English and indigenous languages in Nigeria: A fest chrift in honour of Ayo Banjo. Group Publishers
- Hunjo, Henry. J. Pragmatic nativisation. New Nigerian English. (Eds.) S.T. Babatunde & D.S Adeyanju. Language, meaning and society. Papers in honour of E.E. Adegbija at 50, Ilorin. Haytee Press and Publishing.
- 

(Copyright @ 2022, IJARI)