

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN NON-NATIVE ENVIRONMENTS: ISSUES, PATTERNS AND PREFERENCES

A FESTCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF  
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## RECENT INNOVATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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### 1. Introduction

A definition of innovation would normally be the starting point for a paper of this kind. By way of illustration, the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines innovation as 'the introduction of something new' or 'a new idea, method or device'. It is noteworthy that most of the literature has steered clear of this logical but ultimately unhelpful approach. The reason is immediately clear. If context is taken into account: what might be an innovation in one setting may be routine in another. A related issue is the connection between innovation, change and reform. Innovation and reform are intersecting subsets in the broader domain of change.

According to Awonusi (2010), "one of the greatest impacts of the internet age is the emergence of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) which is passionately used by members of the 'net generation'. CMC, of course, has many forms which include e-mail communication, electronic chats, SMS texts, etc"( p. 1). The effects of the use of the internet communication has resulted in modifications which can be regarded as recent innovations in English language which is the language of the internet

Nowadays, teachers often report that students' assignments are full of abbreviations (Lee, 2002). Although it is easy for teachers to hold CMC accountable for this problem, Baron (2003) offers an alternative explanation: "technology often enhances and reflects rather than precipitate linguistic and social change"(p. 88). Thus, one possibility is that CMC is simply mirroring the emerging tendency for written genres to be more like speech, a process referred to as "colloquialization"(Mair 1998; Hundt and Mair 1999; Leech and Smith, 2005). At the sametime, the graphic nature of some CMC items (e.g., emoticons, elongated spellings, etc.) makes it entirely unlike speech. Both developments reveal new tendencies, suggesting that CMC may actually be the beginning of the evolution of the English language in general (Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008, p 8). Today electronic text messaging in Nigeria which started less than a decade ago is fast becoming a communicative paradigm (Awonusi, 2004). Chiluwa (2008) also argues that GSM (SMS texts) has brought into Nigeria a variety of English that is situationally distinctive. Texting thus throws into sharp focus a number of issues and problems like register as style in linguistics, economy and linguistic theory, informality in Nigerian English, discourse features in Nigerian English, etc. ( Awonusi, 2010 . p.7)

As far back as the 1960s, studies by linguists like Walsh (1967),



Banjo (1969), Bamgbose (1971), Afolayan( 1977), Jibril (1982),Eka (1985), Odumuh (1984), Adegbija (1989), Bamiro (1994), Jowitt (1991) and Udofot (1997, 2004) among others have attempted a linguistic characterisation of what was first described as 'the English Language in Nigeria' but later as 'Nigerian English'. Such studies have also pointed out that Nigerian English is basically text-dependent or bookish and consequently has little or no room for the racy, colloquial linguistic features that are characteristic of the domain of informal English. In fact, Marchese (1982) pointed out that the paucity of informal English has led to the use of Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of informal communication in Nigeria (as life tolerates no vacuum). However, the advent of CMC, particularly SMS messaging seems to show writers' dependence on linguistic features of informal English as an important vehicle for communication.

This paper examines the English of present day computer mediated communication in Nigeria namely; e-mails, webpage posts, chats and social media network on the Internet to ascertain the innovations in them and their impact on Nigerian English. The basic assumption is that the English now used by Nigerians from primary through secondary to the tertiary levels has changed and become more colloquial as well as displaying features of computer assisted communication influence. The changes constitute the recent innovations in the English Language in Nigeria across levels.

## 2. Research Procedure

Data for this study were collected from the *Nigerian Punch Online Newspaper* readers' comments and *Nairaland Forum*, emails, Internet massaging IM /Chats (yahoo messenger chat logs), facebook (for Social Media). These data were collected by Chibuike Smart Mharachi, a Ph.D student of the Department of English under my supervision, for his pilot study on Nigerian Online English. The data were collected from Nigerians of varied educational backgrounds and age. Ten texts each submitted or posted by different writers from these four areas were randomly selected. All the subjects were requested to send their chat logs as email attachments or send their non confidential emails except for the data on web posts which were collected from the *Nigerian Punch Online Newspaper* posts and *Nairaland Forum* posts. Facebook subjects also willingly posted to the facebook wall of the researcher. Although many people use pseudonymous identities for their internet linguistic identities such as email, chats, web posts and face book, the process of data collection for this study ensured the anonymity of the subjects and the data they have submitted even when they did not hide their true identities. Content analysis framework was used to identify and code the major observable features of the English now used for

online communication.

## 3. Presentation of Data

In Tables 1 and 2 below, the features observed as well as the frequency of occurrence in the forms of online activities studied are shown.

**Table 1: General Content Features of Data**

Content Features	Examples
Acronym/Initialism	PDP,FB,(facebook)LLNP(long life and prosperity, LOL(laugh out loud), Xup (what's up?), IBB
Codeswitching/codemixing	Where youdey all this while, Abeg if ursister is available, let me know. Nwanne how far? u know they'll b better dan u wen dey get to ur age and level,I support the rite to bear arms against these oloriburuku people. Gold card ko silver card ni.
Idioms/ proverbs	Toronto degree, breeze don blow and fowl yansh must open, well done (greeting) ,have mouth to talk (bold or unashamed)
Letter/number homophones (alphanumerics)	De for the, b for be, dat for that, dis for this, dan, for than broda for brother, u for you, y for why, 2 for to, 4 for 'for'
Nigerian pidgin	Dem, him broda, dey. Na, wen, tink,don, sabi, wetin, how far, abeg, abi, sista, comot, hala
Respelling and shortening	Bcos, ur, yr, gt(get), ppl (people), wld (would), pls,tech (technology),av, hv (have), beta( better), k (ok), wkend, rite (write), sum (some), gov (government).
Sound simulation	Ahhhh, dey-oooooo, hehehehe
Symbols	@, &, b...h bitch
Neologisms	Beef, flex, bigging up,
Deviant spelling	Afterall, paers (paper) maadam, expences, weeding (wedding), dirve(drive), height, beer (bear)

**Table 2: Frequency of Occurrence of Features**

Features	Web %	Face- %	Email %	Chat/IM
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	page Data	Occur- ence	book Data	Occur- ence	Data	Occu- rence	Data	Occurrence
Acronym	06	0.40	02	0.75	02	0.18	06	0.42
Codemixing switching	06	0.40	04	1.5	06	0.55	24	1.68
Idioms and Proverbs	02	0.13	02	0.75	04	0.37		
Letter/No. homo- phones	58	3.87	28	10.5	04	0.37	96	6.75
Nigerian pidgin	124	8.27	20	7.51	04	0.37	118	8.27
Respelling & shortening	36	2.40	46	17.3	10	0.93	84	5.90
Deviant Spelling	14	0.93	04	1.5	12	1.12	16	1.12
Neologism	02	0.13	-	-	-	-	02	0.14
Sound Simulation	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	0.70
Emoticon/ Smiley's	-	-	-	-	-	-	44	3.09
Symbols/ Ellipsis	-	-	08	3.0	-	-	-	-
Total	248	16.55	114	42.85	42	3.91	400	28.12
Total Word tokens	1498		266		1072		1422	

#### 4 Analysis of Data

It was observed from the data that there was a low usage of acronyms/initialisms in the Web post data as seen by the low percentage frequency occurrence of 0.40%. Facebook on the other hand had the highest occurrence of acronyms and initialisms amounting to 0.75% followed by instant messages with 0.42%. E mail had the lowest number of this feature with 0.18%. This suggests that the use of acronyms /initialism by Nigerians in their On line English activities may be very low compared to other nationals (cf Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008). It also suggests that Nigerians on facebook may be using this feature more than in other areas of internet communication.

Regarding codemixing and codeswitching, it was observed that Nigerians instant message users tend to codemix and codeswitch more possibly because instant messages use more speech / discourse features. In our data, 1.68% of the instant message data show incidence of codemixing/codeswitching compared to facebook which was 1.5%, email 0.55% and web post which was 0.40%. Instant message (chat users) exhibited the highest number of this content feature followed by Facebook users. Instant message data, however, showed no incidence of idioms/proverbs. This can be put down to the urgency of typing chat messages to meet up with the conversation speed which may not allow the participants time for typing longer stretches of clauses and sentences. Facebook data, on the other hand, showed 0.75% idioms/proverbs content features. This was followed by e-mail which had 0.37 and web post with 0.13% content.

Letter/number homophones, one of the known features of internet language, was observed to be high in the Facebook data (10.5%) followed by the instant message data (6.75%). Web posts data recorded 3.87% with email having only 0.37%. Two reasons may be suggested for this state of affairs: one is that facebook culture which encourages brevity and economy of space while the high number of youth who use Facebook and internet chat can be said to be also responsible for the profuse use of alphanumeric features. This content feature was very minimal in the email data analysed which could be explained in terms of the email being a bit more formal than the chat on facebook and the chat rooms.

There is a noticeable presence of the Nigerian English-based pidgin in the areas studied. Many of the texts were either written in pidgin or codemixed/codeswitched with English and Nigerian languages. The frequency was higher in instant messages (8.29%), followed by web posts (8.27%). Facebook data was observed to have 7.51%. the email data recorded the lowest Nigerian pidgin content with 0.37% suggesting again

that the email is a more formal communication than the chat or Facebook communication. The email also retains some features of traditional letter writing, only shorter and less formal.

The highest incidence of respelling and shortening of words (17.3%) came from Facebook. Instant messaging came closest to Facebook which had 5.90% followed by web posts with 2.40%. Email had the lowest (0.93). It was expected that respelling and shortening will be higher in IM than it was in Facebook data because of the urgency in typing messages during chat conversations but that was not the case. This may be because Facebook is patronized more by the younger generation.

Deviant spelling was observed to be also high in the Facebook data (1.5%) followed by the email and the instant message data which recorded 1.12% each. Web posts had the lowest number of deviant spellings with 0.93%. Neologisms were observed in only two areas: Web posts (0.13) and instant Messaging (0.14). Facebook data were the only one where symbols and ellipsis (3.0%) were attested. Instant messaging/chat recorded 0.70% of sound simulation and 3.09% of emoticons/smiley. No other area showed the presence of sound simulation or of emoticons/smiley in their communication process. This is probably due to the fact that chatting approximates ordinary human conversation, but in the written form leading to the emergence of the "mixed mode" (spoken mode features used in written mode channel) (Posteguillo, 2003).

The above analysis shows that Facebook has the highest percentage of the content features found in the data analysed (42.85%) of its total word tokens of the data. This is followed by IM/chat with 28.12% of content features out of the total word tokens of the data. Web post has 16.55% of its total word tokens as the content features of its data. Email has the lowest of them all with only 3.91%.

## 5 Discussion

The analysis of findings indicates that Nigerian English as used in computer mediated communication is in communion with the Internet language which is noted to be very prominent at the lowest level of the rank scale (Posteguillo, 2003). This is as a result of the high number of acronyms/initialisations letter/number homophones, respelling and shortening, etc. that have been identified as features of online English. These features are sometimes mixed with either Nigerian pidgin code or other Nigerian languages. At the higher levels of the rank scale, this variety has exhibited features which approximate those of the existing Nigerian English namely; transliteration, codemixing/codeswitching idioms/ proverbs.

However, the Nigerian English of the Internet can be classified differently from the existing Nigerian English. Due to the informal nature of

the Internet language from the data used for this study, this variety may be classified by its formal, semi formal and informal nature/levels. Based on this suggestion and the data analysed, computer mediated English in Nigeria at its formal level has few or no internet language codes, minimal use of acronyms and no pidgin codes. It rather approximates the Standard English variety. This level has been exemplified by the overall content percentage of some of our email data. At the semi formal level, there is an average number of the Internet language codes, more Nigerian English codes and minimal inclusion of pidgin codes and indigenous language codes. At the informal level, Nigerian computer mediated English is replete with lots of pidgin codes, a lot of internet language codes, use of emoticons and simulation as well as use of symbols. This is very common with the chat message and some Facebook data analysed. We note here that these levels may not be determined by the platforms, but by the writer's attitude, level of education and the type of communication (whether formal or informal).

## 6 Conclusion

This study has clearly established the existence of an online variety of English that is computer technology and internet driven. It is evident that new things have happened to the English language in Nigeria. These recent innovations in English in Nigeria can be observed at all levels from primary through secondary to tertiary education and beyond. Those who have no access to the computer have access to the GSM smart phones which they use for text messaging which have features of electronic communications of the Internet. Even primary school children use the toy computers and tablets with which they play games, learn and use the Internet language. It is only the illiterate Nigerian that is unaware of the innovations in English language. Secondary school students are even near adept in the use of instant messaging and social media not to mention university students. The Nigerian internet users are part of the global village and the current trends in the language of the Internet are very much with us. Notwithstanding the fact that the main conclusion drawn from this study namely; that what can be considered recent innovations in the English language in Nigeria is the gradual 'colloquialization' of Nigerian English hitherto described as 'bookish, through the presence of features of technology-driven communication are based on the data collected and analysed for the study; it can be safely said that this conclusion holds true for English not only in Nigeria, but also in all varieties of global Englishes.

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