

JOURNAL OF THE NIGERIA ENGLISH STUDIES ASSOCIATION (JNESA)

Volume 14 Number 2 ISSN0029-0009 September 2011

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The English Language and Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

In this paper, the author examines the place of English in Nigeria vis-à-vis the National Policy on Education. She observes that despite arguments to the contrary, English has been given a pride of place in the Nigerian educational system; it is unofficially the lingua franca and the first language of the younger generation. The author opines that the domesticated version of English used by educated Nigerians be accepted and taught in the educational system.

Key words: Nigerian English, educated English, National Policy on Education

Introduction

English has developed in Nigeria, as has been the case in other colonies of Britain in Africa and Asia, largely through the education system, although the antecedent of Nigerian English – the English Based Pidgin – developed through trade (Elugbe and Omamor 1991). Its phonology, lexis, semantics, syntax, pragmatics and acceptability have been variously analyzed (cf. Banjo 1995).

Certain Problems, however, face the English Language in Nigeria. These are: the reluctance of the average educated Nigerian to accept Nigerianisms in English as indicating differences rather than deviant usages; the reluctance of teachers of English to accept them in teaching and examinations; the future government language policies in education and their implications for the future of Nigerian English. These problems are compounded by the fact that standard reference books of what constitutes acceptable usage in Nigerian English are yet to appear in sufficient number to measure up with research in linguistics.

The National Education Policy and the Role of English

In Nigeria, the *National Education Policy* (NPE), formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004, assigns to English the role of serving as the language of instruction from the fourth year of a six-year primary course to the tertiary level. In addition, English is to be taught as a school subject right from the first year of primary education. The constitution has a clause which recognizes one of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (the languages of the larger ethnic groups in Nigeria) as an additional language of official proceedings in the federal legislature in addition to English as soon as the implementation is feasible (Banjo, 1996). To this effect, secondary school students are encouraged to learn one of these three Nigerian languages in addition to their mother tongues and English, if one of the three languages is not their

mother tongue. These national policies, however, cannot be said to be fully in operation. In urban primary schools, for instance, instructions are given in English right from the first year of primary education, while the switch to English in the fourth year of primary education hardly operates even in Federal Government schools because of the difficulties of having teachers.

The above discussion shows that English has enjoyed a pride of place in Nigerian society. The NPE has cultivated this prominence by recommending its being taught right from the first year of primary education. Literacy in English and/or oracy in it guarantee acceptance and success anywhere in the country. The result is that even the old woman in the remotest village in Nigeria who has never been to school can boast of a few English words and sentences. An illiterate neighbour of mine whose grandchildren made so much noise because of a continuous chattering in English once screamed:

'Yak nkop nkpo mmuyom iko mbakara ndufo ami- Nonsense!'
(Let me hear with your noisy chatter in English- Nonsense?)

Clearly, the older generation who are apparently resenting the pervasive use of English by the younger generation cannot finish a sentence without a word of English.

3. Endonormative Model for the Teaching of English in Nigeria

Three main areas of the language problems and prospects in Nigeria have often been addressed: effects on education, development and national integration (see, for instance, Adeniran 1995, Essien 2009, Oyetade 1993). These studies have made various recommendations one of which is a one language option for the purpose of national integration. The languages frequently recommended have been English, Hausa, Pidgin, Swahili and even a purposely 'created' artificial language (Oyetade 2003) called 'Wazobia'. Others have recommended the multilingual approach, which supports the elevation of one or more Nigerian languages to the status of national language, while Eka (2000) has recommended a progressive trilingual approach, which involves 'getting Nigerians to ultimately learn a Nigerian language first of their choice and later of popular (government and public) choice' (pp. 5-6). In my contribution to this discussion, I have suggested a nativized variety of English to be used in Nigeria, both as lingua franca and official language, while each state should develop and use its own indigenous language, in addition to English (cf. Udofot 2003, 2006).

This appears to me the workable alternative because of the peculiarity of the Nigerian situation. Nigeria has not had a comprehensive language policy as an organized attempt to find solutions to language problems in the country. What has emerged as a language policy came about in the context of other

centrally defined national concerns such as the development of a national policy on education and the drafting of a constitution for the country. It is in connection with the national policy on education and *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* that we talk about language policy and planning in Nigeria (Oyetade, 2003).

With the increased level of literacy in Nigeria and the increasing number of English users in the Nigerian society, it is anticipated that by the middle of the twenty-first century, Nigerian English may have two main varieties: the standard variety used by everybody, including the educated Nigerians, for communication outside official circles and many non-standard varieties. The non-standard varieties will likely reflect the language of the community where they flourish. The bulk of it would be intelligible to people who share the same language with the speaker and partly to other Nigerians who may not understand the codemixed words from the Nigerian Language. This brand of Nigerian English (NNE) will be slightly different from the present geographical varieties of Nigerian English, for instance, Esen's (1961) 'Efiglish' and Nwafor's (1971) Englibo, Englihausa 'Engliyoruba', in the sense that the present geographical variations are largely attempts to render the standard variety with mother tongue interference on mainly the accent. The non-standard Nigerian English of the 21st century will not be Standard English but hybrids of English words and words from Nigerian vernaculars. They will constitute dialects rather than accents of Nigerian English which in time are likely to Creolize.

The standard variety, on the other hand, may become more Nigerianized. Having been taught in the school system, it will be the brand used for official purposes by all Nigerians who learn English in Nigeria. It must be noted that in spite of reactions to the contrary, Nigerian English is the brand being taught and used in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria because, for some decades now, English teaching in most parts of the country has been done by Nigerians who were taught by other Nigerian teachers themselves. Most teachers who were taught by expatriates (mother tongue speakers of English) are now dead or retired. The point being made here is that the Nigerian (nativised variety) is now being taught in schools and used by products of the school system and, following observable trends in language change, is likely to be sufficiently different from standard British English to deserve the name 'Ninglish'.

The question now is: if in the face of government policies and attempts to develop and encourage the use of the Nigerian languages (at least in the first six years of life before the learning of the second language) people still teach English to Nigerian babies, apparently to help them do well in school and be able to communicate outside the home, is English, therefore, easy to

replace in Nigeria in the foreseeable future? Should Nigerian Children continue to learn British or American accents and varieties when the English spoken in Nigeria has identifiable features. According to Essien (2009) "... the English used by many Nigerians of the younger generations may have English words and expressions but little English grammar or meaning" (p.193). Also, Udofot (2007a:52) suggested that

Examination bodies could help by modifying the form and content of tests in the light of the nativised standard variety in the country. This is in conformity with the rejection of 'globally normative' features as tests of English as an international language (cf Lowenberg, 1993, p.104). This would answer banjo's (1993) call for 'an endonormative model' for the teaching of English in Nigeria as teachers would now adjust their teaching materials to reflect the form and content of examinations.

3.1 Features of Nigerian English

In the light of the above, certain features of Nigerian English should be allowed, reinforced and actually taught to Nigerian children. In teaching oral English, for instance, rather than teach the Received Pronunciation (RP) or Standard American, the following features variations should be taught.

3.1.1 Segmental Features

With regard to identifying the performance features of Nigerians in the areas of segmental features, the following deviations should be noted and allowed:

BE (British English)	NE (Nigerian English)
$\left[\begin{array}{c} i: \\ I \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $[j]$ as in <u>mosquito</u> , <u>humiliated</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} e \\ ei \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $[e]$ as in <u>away</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} o: \\ a \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[\begin{array}{c} o \\ e \end{array} \right]$ as in <u>mosquito</u> as in <u>humiliated</u>

$\left[\begin{array}{c} a \\ a: \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[a \right]$ as in <u>passed</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} i \\ iə \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[\begin{array}{c} ie \\ ia \end{array} \right]$ as in <u>ear</u> as in <u>fear</u> [fia]
$\left[\begin{array}{c} əu \\ uə \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[\begin{array}{c} o \\ uo \end{array} \right]$ as in <u>mosquito</u> and <u>told</u> as in <u>poor</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} θ \\ t \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[t \right]$ as in <u>think</u> , <u>thigh</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} ð \\ v \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[d \right]$ as in <u>that</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} v \\ f \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[f \right]$ as in <u>alive</u>
$\left[\begin{array}{c} z \\ s \end{array} \right]$	\rightarrow $\left[s \right]$ as in <u>was</u>

Certain vocalic and consonantal processes also characterize Nigerian English. These include:

- (i) A preponderance of stressed syllables e.g. Do you 'like' rice rendered as 'Do' 'you' like 'rice'?
- (ii) Monophthongisation of diphthongs and triphthongs or change to glides as in away /ə'weɪ/ being produced as [a'we] or [e'we] and power /'paʊə/ produced as ['pawa]
- (iii) Word final consonants are often devoiced as in was /wəz/ produced as [wɔs] and alive /əlaɪv/ produced as [əlaɪf]
- (iv) Simplification of word final clusters as in child and told /ʃaɪld, təʊld/ being simplified to [ʃaɪl] and [tɔl] or [təʊl].
- (v) Insertion of epenthetic vowels between consonant clusters as in scratched and skeleton /skrætʃt/ and /skelɪtn/ which were

produced as [sikraʃ] and [sikeleton] mostly by Nigerians from the northern part of Nigeria.

3.1.2. Stress and Tone

Udofot (2009) has shown that the Nigerian speaker hardly uses stress but tone and word boundary lowering, which gives the impression of pitch accent and shifting of stress to English ears. It can, therefore, be suggested that the Nigerian English speaker hardly uses stress the way it is understood by speakers of Germanic languages but, more or less, uses tone the way it is used in Nigerian languages. Also, vocalic intervals alone may not be conclusive evidence of syllable timing since, as in this study, full and reduced vowels do not necessarily correlate with high and low tones.

Although many studies in Nigerian English prosody note the presence of more stressed words/syllables in Nigerian English than there would be in a native English version, the basic assumption in this paper is that the speaker of Nigerian English does not really represent the accents in terms of the pitch accents of West Germanic languages but in the word tone patterns where each such pattern sounds like a pitch accent to English ears. For instance, the compounds 'everyone' and 'anyone' have word boundary lowering between 'every' and 'one'; 'any' and 'one' causing the words to sound like everyone and anyone rather than the native speaker's EVERYone and ANYone. The same is true of words like 'life line' and 'landlord', which would be produced as 'life LINE' and 'landlord', rather than the native speaker's 'LIFE line' and 'LANDlord'. It would therefore be wrong to say that the Nigerian speaker places the pitch accent/stress on the wrong word here; rather, he/she uses tone on each word/syllable causing the native English speaker to interpret the pattern as if the stress and, therefore, the pitch accent come on the wrong word. What this suggests is that Nigerians' tendency to use tone on every syllable strong or weak which gives the auditory impression that many and at times all syllables are stressed.

With regard to intonation, it has been shown by Gussenhoven and Udofot's (2009) study of Standard Nigerian English, which confirms an earlier finding by Gut's (2002:176-177), that Nigerian English speech rhythm is similar to Singaporean English with regard to the proportion of vocalic intervals and stands between stress-timed intonation language and a tone language. Since this is the variety of English spoken by educated Nigerians, the tone timed description can be used to describe the speech rhythm of the standard Nigerian accent of English which, though different from the performance of the native speaker, is not statistically different, except in tone, which gives the auditory impression of pitch accents indicating stress to the ears of speakers of Germanic languages. It would, therefore, be a needless venture to teach Nigerians to try to speak English with a stress

timed rhythm or use English intonation tunes when the English they speak shows that the tone that operates in Nigerian languages operate in English too and Nigerian English is therefore tone-timed rather than stress timed.

4. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the place of English in the *National Policy of Education*. It has been noted that despite legislations to the contrary, English has been given a pride of place in the Nigerian educational system and, unofficially, it has even become the lingua franca in Nigeria and the first language of the younger generation. Rather than entertain the vain hope of doing away with English in Nigeria, we suggest the acceptance and teaching of a domesticated Nigerian variety. Although the spoken form is the focus in this paper, it is recommended that the Nigerianised versions in the other aspects be accepted and taught to give Nigerians a viable variety of English like those in other parts of the world, for identity.

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