

ALÓRE

Vol. 15 2005



**ILORIN
JOURNAL
OF THE
HUMANITIES**

ISSN 0794-455

PROSODIC CONFIGURATION OF SELECT NIGERIAN ENGLISH NEWS TEXTS

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Introduction

As a country weaned from the British political superstructures of colonialism, Nigeria has continued to advocate and entrench the indigenization of English language. Coupled with this is the fact that English has, over the years, acquired a universal status as an exigent alternative to a national language question in the country. Hence, the pedestal on which English stands receives continuous 'dignification'. It is in view of this that a variant form of English which is Nigerian; and which wears the garbs and robes of peculiar ethnolinguistic features of local languages of its speakers in the country begins to be more striking and real.

In Nigeria, the study of the notion of 'Nigerian English' has taken a rather radical dimension in modern linguistics with experts trying to explore and exploit the possible ways of defining and appraising Nigerian-based English. Owing to the various socio-cultural and linguistic differences in the country, the appropriation of English in place of the seemingly elusive national language becomes imperative. However, one should not fail to understand that the variety of English in Nigeria exhibits deviations from the "core"; and this is either prompted by interference or creativity. So, Nigerian English can be looked at as a variety of English which is socially acceptable across the cultures of the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. This variety carries the idiosyncratic Nigerian features at the various levels of language, most especially phonology. Bamgbose (1971:42) asserts that:

The major differences between English in Nigeria and English in other countries are to be found mainly in the spoken form of the language. The greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerians is the sound system of the vernacular languages. Most of the phonetic characteristics in the English of Nigerians can, of course, be traced to the transfer of features from their first language....

Hence, if it is a natural phenomenon to have different varieties of a language, then, a study of the prosodic features of Nigerian English becomes paramount in an attempt to situate meaning within the phonetic and phonological structure of the language. Bamgbose's (1971:48) predictive submission corroborates the reality of Nigerian English when he adds that:

In view of the existence of many mother tongues in Nigeria, the English spoken and written in Nigeria is bound to be influenced by these languages; new features are bound to develop and are in fact already developing. In time, many of these features are likely to become stable and ultimately standardized and a distinct Nigerian variety of English... will then emerge.

Considering the date of publication of the paper from where the citation is culled (which, of course, is more than three decades now), it should be understood that the evolution of English has reached an advanced stage. In view of the foregoing, it becomes necessary to assess and highlight the peculiar prosodic features, amidst a host of other levels and sub-levels of language, which typify Nigerian English. Selected NTA network newsreel as rendered by casters from different geo-political zones in the country would be used as our subject and a measure of our target variety. It is hoped that this would serve as our 'linguistic barometer' of measuring the density of interference and regional colouring (if any) in the spoken English accent of the newscasters.

NTA News Text as a Candidate for Standard Nigerian English

It is an indisputable fact that Nigeria is a multilingual society and that these varying indigenous languages, owing to differences in their systemic constituents and patterns, influence the English in Nigeria in different ways. The implication here is that there are as many versions of spoken English in Nigeria as the Nigerian indigenous languages which influence the 'supranational' variety. So, for a study of this nature to have a focus, the selection of an 'intra-national' variety as our target dialect of study; and as a formidable representative of Nigerian English becomes imperative.

The yardstick for the selection of NTA news text as a candidate for Standard Nigerian English (hereafter NE or SNE) stemmed from the proposition of Banjo's (1971) classification of spoken English varieties in Nigeria. According to his thesis, variety three gains the universal acceptability within the geographical framework of Nigeria while at the same time possesses a fairly high level of international intelligibility. The variety, according to Banjo, stands as the best of the varieties Nigerians should strive to cultivate. This is because it retains the distinctive features with a unique accent which really makes it Nigerian (Fakuade, 1998:125).

Similarly, in Adesanoye's (1973) work, he relates Banjo's phonological forms to written English and this culminates into three varieties. According to Fakuade (1998:126), citing Adesanoye (1973), the variety of English classified as SNE is found among graduates, university lecturers, most lawyers, legislators, 'the editors and the feature writers of the better class of the Nigerian journalist...' and since most NTA network newscasters from the three major geopolitical zones in the country fall into this category, the NTA network newsreel becomes an inalienable candidate for SNE and a valid yardstick for our study.

From the foregoing, one can see that the variety of English used by journalists, feature writers and newscasters in Nigeria readily fits into variety three in both Banjo and Adesanoye's classifications. This is because in the variety, apart from a handful deviant features and 'purely Nigerian accent' superimposed on its phonological rendition, there is hardly any other outstanding trait which distinguishes it from

the educated varieties from other English speaking countries. It is in the light of this background that this paper draws its emphasis on the basic suprasegmentals which typify SNE. The NTA network news text is selected because it fulfils the prerequisites of SNE as identified by popular linguists like Odumuh (1987), Adegbija (1989) and Jowitt (1991), among others, who have shown serious interest in the study of Nigerian English. Similarly, the NTA network newscasters are expected to have crossed the hurdle of wholesale mother tongue interference because they have been trained as journalists to speak and use educated variety which automatically qualifies as SNE.

On the notion of Standard Nigerian English, Oyeade (2000:57-58) presents a thesis on the viability of the argument in support of its existence. His study, which centres on the phrasal rhythm of Standard English and Nigerian English, shows the differential features between the two varieties. In the light of the foregoing, it becomes justified to explore how these 'variable elements' which characterize Nigerian English combine at the level of prosody into a network of logical whole to offer a sampled Nigerian English text its unique identity.

There are different levels at which the phonological variations in Nigerian English can be described and explicated. These include the segmentals of vowels and consonants, syllables and stress distinction and the various spheres of suprasegmental phonology. This paper, however, focuses on the prosody of Nigerian English and how its various constituents combine into a harmony of sequential relations.

The Rhythm of SNE

Rhythm is a regular pattern of beat which is detectable in the regular occurrence of stressed syllables (Roach, 1997:120). The popular belief that English is a time-stressed language implies that the salient syllables in our speech tend to occur at regular interval regardless of whether they are separated by silent (unstressed) syllables or not. Rhythm in English has a "relatively equal" time-stressed isochronism (Ofuya, 1999:40). In essence, the length of time/duration of a stressed syllable to the next (stressed) tends to be the same regardless of the intervening unstressed syllable (s). This does not mean that the interval must be 'exactly' equal. Similarly, an

utterance with three unstressed syllables and one stressed syllable cannot be said to take the same length of time as a salient monosyllabic word. This notwithstanding, the former cannot take four times (or even twice) the duration of the latter.

Therefore, in the variety of English typified as Nigerian, the rhythmic variation from the native variety is not that pronounced (Cf. Odumuh, 1987:52–54) especially when users render words with correct and appropriate stress patterns in connected speech. The inevitability of correct rendition of words stress stems from the background that every word in the English lexicon normally has its natural stress patterns which users, whether native or foreign, acquire and use. And since there is no SNE 'lexicon' yet, it becomes justified to use the native stress patterns derivable from native speakers' lexicon. What we are saying here is that, at the level of stress placement in words, SNE hardly exhibits a marked variation from the native speakers' variety. Because the rhythmic pattern of a text is based upon the stress pattern of its constituent words, there seems to be no outstanding disparity noticeable in SNE, hence, the emphasis of this paper shall be placed on tone types and intonation in Nigerian English in the light of their respective functions.

Similarly, in the text used as the data for this study, one finds out that the rhythm is almost in total agreement with the foregoing, except for a slight difference in timing which is occasionally observable when a more scientific approach is adopted. For instance, ordinarily, monosyllabic grammatical words should not receive stress prominence in connected speech. Owing to the constraints of English, as a foreign language in Nigeria, speakers seek to use contrastive and emphatic stresses a lot where, ordinarily, such are not required. On this, Leeuwen (1992:239–240) submits that newsreaders and announcers (on radio)

seem to be in the habit of making almost everything they say sound important, regardless of whether it is in any real sense, a habit for which they have often been criticized... placing emphasis on unimportant words [to create] a sense of excitement not truly present in the material in front of them....

It is worthy to note that this pervasive influence becomes absorbed by average Nigerians who see media as models and therefore complement the efforts of media workers by internalising and, at the same time, disseminating the 'artificial prosody' of the English language in Nigeria as a foreign context. This view is corroborated by Odumuh (1987:54) concerning the rhythm of Nigerian English as he writes:

What seems to be a reasonably accurate description of the happening in SNE is that the timing is INELASTIC... there is the likelihood of more prominent syllables in the same given speech realized by an educated Nigerian speaker of English, then the speaker of SNE cannot "squeeze in" the relatively more prominent syllables into the available time...

The implication of the foregoing is that prominence is given to a hitherto silent syllable and the overhead effect is that more time is expended on the phonetic stretch in itself. Consequently, the notion of isochronisms is affected. Textual examples culled from the newsreel are hereby given as illustration:

<i>'The 'legal 'aid 'council</i>	(NE)	
<i>The 'legal 'aid 'council</i>	(SBE)	
<i>'Council 'will con'tinue</i>	(NE)	
<i>'Council will con'tinue</i>	(SBE)	App. (1)
<i>'He 'said, to'day</i>	(NE)	
<i>He 'said, to'day</i>	(SBE)	App. (2)
<i>Ni'geria 'has ex'pressed 'its de'sire</i>	(NE)	
<i>Ni'geria has ex'pressed its de'sire</i>	(SBE)	App. (3)

The question now is: Is there a symbiosis between the emphatic stress used and the subject matter? Yes! The newsreader's rendition of the newsreel confirms the truism of the statement. In the texts from where the extracts are culled (see appendices), the implication that the extracts carry is to serve as a deterrent to those who believe in 'Nigerian factor' that the commissive act (Searle, 1969) of making a promise in the text might not come to pass. Its cohesive function is that

of assertion – as the rhythm carries an emphatic tone – with accent placed on hitherto unaccented words like “the” and “will”.

Some words which convey the priorities of the news, as exemplified in the foregoing, are accentually foregrounded in relation to the spatio-temporal circumstances. Nigeria, as an ex-British colony still suffers from abject poverty, alienation, and underdevelopments. These problems are made distinct on the nature of accentual patterns with which the text is rendered.

Leeuwen (1992:250) posits that from the linguistic perspective, rhythm establishes two kinds of meaning contrast. The ‘accented’ and ‘not accented’ signify ‘important’ and ‘not-so-important’ respectively. Also, the contrast ‘juncture/no juncture’ signifies ‘one move/two moves’. It should be understood that rhythms carry these possible meanings at different realizations:

- (i) Important
- (ii) Not - so - important
- (iii) Connected moves
- (iv) Disconnected moves

In Nigerian English therefore, rhythm is used to realize specific meaning which is derivable from the social context of language use and NOT semantics. SNE utilizes the social/sociological constraints in predetermining the seemingly strait-jacket rhythmic feature of ‘Standard English’. So, stress and rhythmic boundary placements in spoken text are not formally motivated but functionally determined. This phenomenon accounts for rhythmic structures which are not necessarily perfectly ‘isochronistic’. Though, the rhythm of SNE is also regular to an extent, the degree of its regularity is relative; essentially in relation to style: subject, mode and tenor of a spoken discourse. This feature is grossly lacking in SNE. Probably owing to the excessively formal context of acquiring the language, Nigerian users of the language tend not to be fluid or relaxed where necessary and this gives a picture of frozen kind of rendition whose accompanying rhythm can easily be predetermined. On the other hand, in native spoken texts, certain English syllables lose their vowel nuclei, and this presents a hurried rhythm in most cases and makes native speakers’ speech difficult to comprehend.

The degree of stress with its accompanying tempo, rather than being determined and structured linguistically, gives an insight that the sociolinguistic features are preponderant in its 'stylization' in an attempt to seal the cohesive bond between pragmatic realization of stress and rhythm on one hand and the sociolinguistic constraints on the formal features of language on the other.

The Tonal Pattern

The exigency of the sociolinguistic context of Nigeria in relation to the existing phonetic system of indigenous languages confers on Nigerian English variant kinds of tonicity with which newsreel is rendered as a case study. One major feature of SNE, as could be seen from the data, is its closed tonal system. 'Standard English' exhibits different kinds of intonation like rise, fall, fall-rise, rise-fall (Roach, 1997:152), high-fall, low-fall, mid-rise, mid-fall, low-falling, high-falling, low-rising, high-rising (Gimson, 1970:268 – 282). In essence, the possibility of discerning different versions of a basic tune (either rising or falling) in the speech of native speakers is fairly high in comparison to what obtains in the spoken English of average Nigerians. This is probably due to their higher order acquisition level.

In the data under study however, one discovers no variant forms of both rising and falling tones. The implication here is that the tendency to over-use rising and falling tones or fall-rise and rise-fall as the case might be, would be high. This is exemplified by the textual extracts given in (1) – (3) that follow:

(1a) //in line with the desire//

//actualisation of the mandate given to the council//

//politically by indigent Nigerians//

//that no one is denied justice//

//prisons across the country//

//is the bedrock of democracy//

- (2a) //The three hundred and thirty mega-watts of electricity//
 //Expected to be added to the national grid//
 //on the first of April this year//
 //will come to Agip-NNPC joint venture power project//
 //to provide what the Power and Steel Minister called succour//
 //to the current supply situation in the country//
- (3a) //Nigeria has expressed its desire//
 //to collaborate with any international organization//
 //seeking to advance the well-being//
 //of her citizens//

Apart from accentual and grammatical functions, intonation also performs attitudinal and discursal functions. Since the situation of use places premium on the use of English in Nigeria as a foreign language, the prosody of newsreel is predetermined by the anticipated function that it is meant to perform. Gimson (1970:258) writes:

The meaning of any utterance is largely conditioned by the situation and context in which it occurs. Thus, it must be expected that the freedom of accentual patterning of the utterance and, in particular, of the situation of the primary (tonic) accent will be considerably curtailed by the constraints imposed by the contextual environment.

Another point worthy of note is the fact that in the text under study, one discovers that the tonic syllables tend to occur in the last stressed element in each of the tone groups. For instance:

desire, council, Nigerians; justice, country and democracy (in 1a);
electricity, grid, year, project, succour, and country (in 2a); *desire,*

organization, *being* and *citizens* (in 3a) contain the tonic element in the extract. Hence, it is evident that the tendency for tonic prominence is somewhat frozen in Nigerian English. Situations where variations of tonic patterns occur, in terms of structural positioning, is uncommon in the sampled text as a candidate of SNE. The implication of the foregoing is that the excessive formal context of English language learning constitutes stylistic barrier; that is, the attitudinal function of intonation, in terms of its scope, has been reduced. Butler (1985:141) also shares this view on the contradistinction of tonicity. According to him:

Sometimes, however, the speaker chooses to allocate more than one tone group to a clause... in such circumstances, the tonality is marked... Tonicity relates to the position of the tonic syllable within the tone group. The unmarked position for the tonic syllable is on the stressed syllable of the last lexical word in the tone group... Any other position for the tonic syllable... constitutes marked tonicity.

In the text under study, several instances of this feature abound in a clause. For instance:

(1b) //The Director General of the Legal Aid council// Mrs. Aishat

Hassan Baba// says the council will continue to provide legal
assistance// for indigent Nigerians// in line with the desire// of the
present administration// that no-one is denied justice//.

Ordinarily, a tone group is supposed to contain a clausal unit of idea. However, when one has more than the required tone units allotted to a given stretch of language, the markedness of such an utterance is suggested. This feature is prevalent and predominant in Nigerian English utterances as conditioned by level of competence and inhibitive interference of the linguistic elements of indigenous languages.

In the extract (1b), there are seven tone groups. Of these, only one is marked with a falling nucleus while others carry rising nuclei. A rising nucleus is normally used to indicate unfinished and continuative speech. It is laced with overtones of politeness, encouragement, suspicion or appeal depending on the context of speech and/or situation. A falling nucleus indicates factual, assertive and imperative mood with which an utterance is rendered. The higher the fall in tone, the more the gradient of finality is implied. The extracts (2b) and (3b) which follow suffice to illustrate the foregoing.

- (2b) //He said// today//council approved twenty one point eight billion naira contract// for the establishment of a modern power project// which in less than two years// will supply three hundred and forty eight mega-watts of electricity// in its first combined cycle of operation//
- (3b) //Minister of Labour and Productivity// Dr Hassan Mohammed Lawal// said this at the meeting with a delegation from the American Labour Solidarity Centre Washington// and others// in Abuja//

In the sample text, we have ratio 1:4 occurrences of falling tone to rising tone in Nigerian English connected speech. This stands to foreground the inadequate competence of NE speakers to 'squeeze in' lengthy structure into a foot as a phonological unit. This stems from the syllable-timed constraint placed on users of English language in Nigeria as informed by the phonological systems of major indigenous languages, especially Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. However, the tone types, when used, do not elude courtesies of speech, most especially in

the context of the newsreel which requires an affirmation of interactional exchange's politeness principle.

The socio-pragmatics of the text requires a judicious use of politeness principle as a way of facilitating interpersonal discourse: here between the newscaster on one hand and the audience on the other. Fall-rise is characteristically used for indirect implicatures as a way of registering politeness phenomenon (Leech, 1983:81). Broadly speaking, implicatures are not usually foregrounded in newscast owing to the divergent contexts and perceptions of different listeners. This thesis is predicated on the premise that language is essentially speech and speech is contextually and interpersonally dependent to be meaningful.

In the true rendition of newsreel by Nigerians, one discovers that instances where the casters use rising tone (fall-rise in SBE; as allotones are not normally markedly used in SNE) are quite different and the use is geared towards a different attitudinal function. Looking at the subject of the extract, the tonal pattern ushers in a strong cohesive bond. This is so because "like terms" of tones are made to co-occur in a cue with invariable nuclear accentual pattern. The successive use of rising tone signals continuation and that the sense relations of the various groups are dependent on one another. Hence, little wonder then that series of clarifying structures which seek to explicate or magnify others constitute a fair percentage of the entire structures. For instance:

- (1c) *//The Director General of the Legal Aid Council//*
corresponds to
//Mrs. Aishat Hassan Baba//.
- (2c) *//The three hundred and thirty mega-watts of electricity//*
relates to
//expected to be added to the national grid//
- (3c) *//Minister of Labour and Productivity//*
corresponds to
//Dr. Hassan Mohammed Lawal//

So, instances where dependent clarifying structures are used are normally marked with rising tone in Nigerian English. This is largely informed by the characteristically foot-timed rhythm with which Nigerian English is known. For example:

- (1d) //the council will continue to provide legal assistance//for the
indigent Nigerians// in line with the desire//of the present
administration// that no one is denied justice//
- (2d) //today// council approved twenty one point eight billion
naira contract// for the establishment of modern power
project// which in less than two years// will supply three
hundred and forty eight mega-watts of electricity// in its first
combined operation//
- (3d) //Nigeria has expressed its desire// to collaborate with any
international organization// seeking to advance the well-
being// of her citizens//

In essence, Nigerian English, as a variety, has certain features which typify it from other varieties. Suprasegmentally, peculiar phonetic qualities are introduced and which make the Nigerian English usage to be marked in certain environments. The markedness, in line with the discursial and attitudinal goals, shows how the non-structural ties in utterances can be used to convey a given message within a given context of language use, especially of English, whether that of speech or situation.

Conclusion

A language in a foreign context is bound to be influenced by the language(s) of the immediate environment. The phonological features which typify Nigerian English, whether at the level of segmental or suprasegmental system, owe allegiance to the native languages. Because most of what we refer to as the national languages in Nigeria seem to have similar features of suprasegments, they tend to influence the prosody of English as a foreign language almost in a similar manner. The syllable system, the phonotactics, the rhythm and the tonal patterns of Nigerian English exhibit peculiar traits which mirror the more general patterns of indigenous languages.

The sampled texts have been carefully chosen as rendered by newsreaders from three major geo-political zones in Nigeria. One discovers that these texts do not present differential prosodic properties. This is probably a confirmation of the observation made earlier in this paper. It is also an attestation that our 'target dialect' in this study, to a certain level, lacks heavy inter-regional colouring within Nigeria and this invariably qualifies it as a 'national' variety.

Features of connected speech as liaison, elisions and weak forms of certain segmental phonemes in certain environments are attributes of 'Standard English'. Like we have discussed earlier, Nigerians tend to be 'bookish'; so bookish in their 'rendition' of English utterances/texts that variations are almost impossible where necessary for attitudinal or stylistic ends. Hence, Nigerian English is devoid of the non-structural ties which characterize Standard British English. This is not to say that Nigerian English lacks phonological cohesion. It does have. It is only that the ties, rather than drawing from Standard British English as its source, wholesale, reveal certain indigenous suprasegmental elements which are interpolated to reshape its destiny.

This paper is not intended to condemn the prosody of Nigerian English but to bring out those marked instances of differential features and as a matter of fact, use that as a basis of foregrounding the existence of Nigerian English, if really language is an inalienable property of its users (Alabi, 2002:96).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The director general of the Legal Aid Council, Mrs. Aishat Hassan Baba says the council will continue to provide legal assistance for indigenes of Nigeria in line with the desire of the present administration that no one is denied justice. She stated this during her visit to Kuje prison, in the FCT, in continuation of her visits to prisons across the country...

The Legal Aid Council director general said government is committed to seeing to the actualization of the mandate given to the council, as access to justice particularly by indigent Nigerians is the bedrock of democracy. She said her visits to other prisons have revealed that some of those in the nation's prisons would not have been there if they had had access to justice.

Culled from:

NTA Network News Broadcast at 9pm
10th September, 2003.

Appendix 2

The three hundred and thirty megawatts of electricity expected to be added to the national grid on the first of April, this year will come from Agip-NNPC joint venture power project while an additional one hundred and sixty-five mega-watts is also expected to be added before the end of the year to provide what the power and steel minister called succour to the current supply situation in the country. He said, today, the council approved twenty one point eight billion naira contract for the establishment of a modern power project which in less than two years will supply three hundred and forty-eight mega-watts of electricity in its first combined cycle operation.

Culled from:

NTA Network News Broadcast at 7am
17th March, 2005.

Appendix 3

Nigeria has expressed its desire to collaborate with any international organization seeking to advance the well-being of her citizens. Minister of Labour and Productivity – Dr Hassan Mohammed Lawal¹ said this at the meeting with a delegation from the American Labour Solidarity Centre, Washington and others in Abuja. Correspondent Adamu Abdullahi has more.

Culled from:

NTA Network News Broadcast at 7am
17th March, 2005.