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Towards a Formal Variety Differentiation of Nigerian English

Mahfouz A. Adedimeji, Department of English, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Abstract

The author examines variety differentiation underpinning the nurture of scholarship of Nigerian English over the years. Apart from reviewing the extant literature of variety differentiation from Bosnahan (1958) to Egbe (2007), he proposes a five-level variety categorisation of non-formal, informal, semi-formal, formal and super-formal Nigerian English varieties based on educational attainment and the five levels of linguistic analysis. The paper concludes that Nigerian English is an unimpeachable reality and that more efforts are needed to standardise its formal variety, which approximates the standard British English, without compromising its distinctive Nigerian aura and distinctiveness.

Key words: variety, variety differentiation, Nigerian English, standard.

Introduction

Like human beings that use it, one overarching characteristic of language is dynamism and its associated adaptability. The diffusion of the English language, for instance, across the three Kachruan circles and the leading functions the language performs across many parts of the world would engender diversity in use and application in various societies (Kachru, 1985). In the Nigerian context where the English language is the most important colonial heritage without which the unity of the country is threatened, varieties exist across levels of social strata in consonance with users' education, status and exposure.

As Alo (2004:77) observes that "language is perhaps the most important factor which directly influences variations in usage and meaning", this variation, a sociolinguistic desideratum, occurs when a language shifts from its natural habitat to operate within a new cultural milieu (Adedimeji and Ojuade, 2009). Variety is thus defined 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" (Jowitt, 1991). The submission of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf (popularly known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) is thus validated that "the words of language act as a mirror to the life of the community using the language ... the vocabulary more or less faithfully reflects the culture whose purpose it serves..." (Sapir, cited in Alo, 2004:78).

This paper is intended to survey the scholarship of differentiating the varieties of English used in Nigeria. It suggests that a good variety differentiation should take all levels of linguistic analysis into consideration as linguistic description is not limited to few areas that most scholars have often focused on. The paper ultimately proposes, in line with the five levels of linguistic analysis, a differentiation of five varieties of English used in Nigeria from *formal* perspectives. These varieties are the non-formal, informal, semi-formal, formal and super-formal. The linguistic characteristics of these levels are identified and standard Nigerian English is identified to be variety four.

Nigerian English and Variety Differentiation

The term "Nigerian English" is the variety of English consisting of both variant and deviant forms used by Nigerians to express their linguistic and socio-cultural experiences. It is largely a regional variety of English, marked by its own features and used by Nigerians or simply "the variety of English spoken and used by Nigerians" (Adeniyi, 2006:26). The concept is conceived by Akindele and Adegbite (1999:146) as:

...that variety of English that has developed in the Nigerian non-native English situation. This is as a result of colonial imposition of the language as well as the native English culture on the country. The variety thus developed is not wholly native English type and not totally Nigerian. It is a blend of the two situations.

Scholarly interest in differentiating the varieties of Nigerian English or the use of English among Nigerians began in 1958 with the publication of L.F. Brosnahan's article, "English in Southern Nigeria" where he identified four levels of English usage based on educational attainment (Adedimeji and Ojuade, 2009). According to him, these levels are I, II, III and IV and they are presented thus:

Level I: Pidgin; spoken by people without any formal education

Level II: Spoken by those who have had primary school education. Most speakers belong to this level.

Level III: Spoken by those who have had secondary school education. Marked by increased fluency, wider vocabulary, and conscious avoidance of Level I usage.

Level IV: Close to Standard English but retaining some features of levels II and III. Spoken by those with university education.

Walsh (1967) on his part identifies two types of English in Nigeria, which are "Nigerian English" and "Imperfect English". According to him, while Nigerian English has non-standard forms which are generally used by educated Nigerians who deem the forms acceptable, Imperfect English is made up of mistakes. He also recognises what he calls "variety", used to indicate a sub-type, saying that English exists as a type which differs from World Standard English and other types at the levels of grammar, lexis and phonology. He also submits that there are "varieties" of Yoruba English, Igbo English, Hausa English, etc. existing within the general Nigerian type of English.

In 1971, based on the weaknesses of Brosnahan's initial effort (see Jowitt 1991, Egwuagu 2004, etc.), Banjo (1971) used linguistic parameters as the basis of his classification. In his study of the Nigerians' spoken English, Banjo contributed the variables of "social acceptability" and "international intelligibility" as he identified the four varieties of English used by Nigerians as:

Variety I: Marked by wholesale transfer of phonological, syntactical and lexical features of Kwa or Niger-Congo to English. Spoken by those whose knowledge of English is very imperfect. Neither socially acceptable nor internationally

intelligible.

Variety 2: Syntax close to that of Standard British English, but with strongly marked phonological and lexical peculiarities. Spoken by up to 75 percent of those who speak English in the country. Socially acceptable, but with rather low international intelligibility.

Variety 3: Close to Standard British English both in syntax and semantics, similar in phonology, different in phonetic features as well as with regard to certain lexical peculiarities. Socially acceptable and internationally intelligible. Spoken by less than 10 percent of the population.

Variety 4: Identical with Standard British English in syntax and semantics, and having identical phonological and phonetical features of a British regional dialect of English. Maximally internationally intelligible, but socially unacceptable. Spoken by only a handful of Nigerians born or brought up in England.

Each of the above varieties differs in its social acceptability (S A) and international intelligibility (I I) status. While Variety I has neither SA nor II, Variety II is SA compliant but I I deficient. Variety III, as Standard Nigerian English, has both S A and II while Variety IV, exclusive to those who have been exposed (to Britain), referred to as "been to", has no SA but has II.

For Adesanoye (1973), "a set of varieties which has tripartite classification" is identified based on occupational parameters. The classification appears to have been informed by the three prevalent levels of education which are primary, secondary and tertiary/university, as attention was on the written English of the groups. They are presented thus:

Variety I: The variety used by the average primary school leavers, the modern school pupils and the low-grade workers.

Variety II: Identified with secondary school leavers, university undergraduates, magistrates and journalists.

Variety III: Identified with the graduate class, university lecturers, superior judges, administrators, editors and sophisticated authors.

Obiechina (1974), on his own part, identified three general varieties, which are as follows:

Variety I: Pidgin

Variety II: Formal usages

Variety III: Creative usages: I. Vernacular usages, II. Popular usages and III. Literary usages

He explains that pidgin is used by those without education or in literary circles to delineate characters in the lower rung of the social ladder. Formal usages are characteristic of that variety used in schools, with the aim of producing speakers with approximate native speakers' standard while literary usages variety has three component aspects: vernacular usages sub-variety recaptures the African language authentically

through its retention of the distinctive form in English translation; popular usages are unintellectual forms of English usage, such as those found in Onitsha market literature while literary usages are the standard Nigerian English forms represented in standard Nigerian fictional and non-fictional writings, which can be interspersed with other sub-varieties for stylistic purposes.

Adekunle (1979) distinguishes three broad varieties of English in Nigeria, arguing that there should be a line of demarcation between errors and accepted usages, random and non-random variation and that non-random patterns should be considered in variety differentiation. The three varieties he discusses are:

Variety I: The near-native speaker variety

Variety II: The local colour variety

Variety III: The incipient bilingual variety

According to him, while the near-Native Speaker Variety is the standard form used by educated Nigerians, the ideal variety that commands social acceptability and international intelligibility, the Local Colour Variety is a Nigerianised English or the "English given a local colour but which tries as much as possible to approximate the native English" (Egwuogu, 2004:108). The incipient bilingual variety on the other hand is suffused with translation forms and deviant syntactic structures.

Odumuh (1987) further uses educational attainment to identify four varieties of spoken English in Nigeria. These are documented by Babatunde (2001a:129-30) thus:

V1 (Non-Standard): Those having primary school education with little exposure. Their English is characterized by L1 interference and inappropriate lexical choice and use.

V2 (Basic or General): It has a fair mastery of segmental and non-segmental distinction and can be fairly easily understood. This variety is characteristic of secondary school leavers who have especially been influenced by bad models.

V3 (Standard or Educated): It has appropriate segmental and non-segmental distinction, and can be understood and accepted nationally and internationally. It is spoken mainly by those who have university education.

V4 (Sophisticated or Near-native): This variety is found with those who are highly educated especially those who have received a specialist training in spoken English or those with long years of exposure to native speakers. There are, however, instances of non-native usage of English here as well.

As far as Awonusi (1987) is concerned, Nigerian English is a continuum that ranges from Acrolectal Nigerian English (NigE) through Mesolectal Nigerian English down to Basilectal Nigerian English. The Acrolectal NigE also means Standard Nigerian English marked by medium local/social acceptability and medium/high international

intelligibility. It is lexically close to Standard British English though it allows some divergence but syntactically, it maintains the standard British English in formal and written usage. The variety is associated with the Nigerian upper class and upper middle class.

The Mesolectal Nigerian English, mainly Nigerian, has high social acceptability and medium international intelligibility. It is characterised by relative closeness to standard British English in written and formal usage but is maximally deviant in its spoken and informal usage – such as in the pluralisation of mass nouns, redundancies, etc. and it is associated with the Nigerian middle class.

The Basilectal English is the substandard or non-standard Nigerian English variety, with medium social acceptability and very low international intelligibility. While its phonetic and phonological features approximate those of Nigerian languages, its lexical items are characterised by loan words or coinages, malapropisms and incorrect choices (Adeniyi, 2006:33).

In his study of “lexico-semantic variation in Nigerian English”, Adegbija (1989) attributes six factors to the variation in the Nigerian lexical patterns, which are:

- a. The pragmatic aspects of the dynamics of a multilingual context
- b. The predominantly formal medium of acquisition of English
- c. Socio-cultural differences between the English and Nigerian people
- d. The pervasive, omnipresent and indomitable influence of the media
- e. The exigencies of varying discourse constraints and modes in English and indigenous languages; and
- f. The standardization of idiosyncrasies and errors.

He also identifies five typologies which are transfer, analogy, acronyms, semantic shift or extension, and coinages and neologisms, which have enjoyed considerable review and application (cf. Babatunde 2001a, Adedimeji 2007, Adedimeji and Ojuade 2009).

Adegbija (1989:175) is positively disposed to the Nigerian English phenomenon, characterising it as being imaginatively fresh and that the typologies “more adequately express the Nigerian mentality, psyche and experience than any native English gloss one might succeed in providing for them”.

Bamiro (1991) also studies the lexico-semantic variation in Nigerian English using three works by three Nigerian writers across the tripartite linguistic divides – Chukwuemeka Ike (Igbo), Kole Omotosho (Yoruba) and Zaynab Alkali (Hausa) – as a case study. Bamiro attributes the five causes of lexico-semantic variation to:

- (a) Translating directly from Nigerian languages;
- (b) Revealing inadequate exposure to English;

- (c) Displaying hyper-correct behaviour towards the norms and codes of native speakers of English;
- (d) Obeying the principles of least effort and economy of expression; and
- (e) Subjecting English language forms and norms to socio-cultural logic and imperative of the Nigerian environment.

He then proceeds to identify and illustrate ten categories of lexico-semantic variation which are: (1) loanshift (2) semantic under-differentiation (3) lexico-semantic duplication and redundancy (4) ellipsis (5) conversion (6) clipping (7) acronyms (8) translation equivalents (9) analogical creation and (10) coinages. A discussion of these categories has been undertaken by Adedimeji (2007).

In a comprehensive study of the Nigerian English phenomenon, Jowitt (1991) contends that differentiating speakers' varieties is difficult because a speaker of the near-native variety may use what he calls "Popular Nigerian English" by which he contends 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" (p.47). To Jowitt, all "Nigerian users of English must be regarded as learners of English," who operate in interlanguage situations, with their uses improving with more educational attainment and general exposure.

Jowitt presents a cline that situates three varieties within that of extreme deviation from the standard British English (VI), those from with many Nigerian English (NE) forms (V2) and those that are close, though still marked by NE "indexical features", to standard British English, all "subsumed under the umbrella term 'PNE'" (p.49). In Jowitt's opinion thus, Nigerian users of English are perpetually on the interlanguage theory of language acquisition, they speak popular Nigerian English which is deviant at its extreme, variant in the use of standard forms and gradually moving towards standard – which is never reached. The implications of this, according to Babatunde (2001a:132), are that:

the learner with the opportunities he has for development continues to move towards a standard, or TL (Target Language) norm; or, on the other hand, where such opportunities are not provided, the language gets fossilized. And since most learners of English today are influenced by the widespread 'inter-language' norms' in the society, "the PNE indexical features" are not only prevalent but also continually reinforced.

On her part, Alabi (2000) believes that "certain occupational lexical items have not been attended to" in previous studies. She, therefore, identifies shift, generalisation, narrowing, re-assignment and analogy as aspects of occupational variation used in Nigerian English. Moreover, Babatunde (2001b: 81-85) agrees with Adegbiya and goes ahead to identify such categories as transfer, analogy, acronyms, semantic extension and generalisation,

narrowing, coinages and idioms as aspects of variation bordering on Nigerian English (Adedimeji and Ojuade, 2009).

Adeniyi (2006) recognises three distinctive varieties of English in Nigeria: variety one, variety two and variety three. Her submission is as follows:

Variety One: Very poor English, heavily accented and transliterated from Nigerian languages. No conscious effort is made to speak the standard. It is associated more with people of low education and poor exposure to the English language, especially the villagers, primary and secondary school leavers and some undergraduates. Lacks local and international acceptability and is associated with entertainment, e.g. "Masquerades".

Variety Two: Nigerian in nature. It may be seen as the evolving Standard Nigerian English. Takes most of its grammar and structure from the Standard British English but has deviations like "ask from the teacher" instead of "ask the teacher". Also has a high level fluency. It is common with children from homes where parents are highly educated who expose their children to the language early in life. Improvement occurs with age/exposure.

Variety Three: Very close to the Standard British English. Spoken by Nigerians with exposure to Western lives through prolonged education and those who have made conscious efforts to improve on their use of English. Common with most highly conscious teachers of English. But we still have Nigerianisms which are of Variety 2 e.g. "a beggar has no choice" instead of "beggars cannot be choosers" (Adeniyi, 2006:35).

Furthermore, Egbe (2007) identifies three major types of varieties in Nigerian English based on the social (class), occupational (functional) and geographical (spatial) parameters. He contends that the varieties pervade the entire society because "each speaker of English must use at least one of them" (p.320). His typology is as follows:

Type One: The English spoken by university-educated people.

Type Two: The English used by secondary school students and people whose formal education is not higher than the secondary school certificate.

Type Three: The English spoken by primary school leavers and many people with some post-primary school education or with some exposure to the varieties mentioned above.

Type Four: The English used by primary and modern school leavers, without exposure to the first two varieties above.

Towards a formal variety differentiation of the English language in Nigeria
Most classifications of varieties of Nigerian English have often identified four levels or varieties (Brosnahan 1958, Banjo 1971, Odumuh 1987, Egbe 2007) while others have identified three (Adekunle 1973, Obiechina 1976, Awonusi 1987, Adeniyi 2006). Others

like Jibril (1982) Adebija (1989), Bamiro (1991) and Alabi (2000) have focused on single levels of linguistic analysis. It is viewed that as language has five levels of description, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, a variety differentiation that uses the template of the levels of linguistic analysis would be more encompassing and descriptive.

Also, most classifications have relied on education as a major parameter, but it is realised that this criterion often applies to written English only. The level of education is not always proportional to the nature of the type of English that Nigerians use; rather, it is exposure and background that determine the spoken variety. For instance, it is not unusual to find a primary school pupil speaking a standard near-native variety while a university professor would speak a basilectal variety that is highly accented, based on the background he had. Egbe's (2007) classification exemplifies this problem when he conceives the best variety as the "English spoken by university-educated people". Whereas, most people claim that many products of university education now are not fully-backed, the classification suggests that all one needs to use the prestigious Type one is a university education.

Today, it is observed that some five levels of Nigerian English varieties are distinguishable. These, in *formal* perspectives, are non-formal, informal, semi-formal, formal and super-formal varieties. These are marked by zero, half and one values on the five levels of linguistic analysis, with the overall value being five (5) for each variety.

Level 1: The non-formal variety

This is the uneducated variety or illiterate English. Apart from English words haphazardly chopped into expressions, it is far from being standard. It is used by those with no knowledge of the language, with English words most likely picked on the street from conversations, discussions, etc.

Level of analysis	Value	Description
Phonology	0	Characterised by a complete transfer of segmental and supra-segmental features of the mother tongue.
Morphology	½	Low knowledge of word-formation, inflections, and lack of mass/count noun distinctions, etc.
Syntax	0	Marked by very imperfect or awkward syntax. Grammatical blunders are a major feature at this level.
Semantics	½	We can still, painstakingly, make out meaning in the utterances.
Pragmatics	½	Low level of inferential ability, discursual competence coupled with kinship terms.
Total	1½	Illiterate English

Level 2: The informal variety

This variety is marked by low level of concept formation in English. The speaker of this variety has primary education in a local setting where exposure to the educated users of English is limited. At all levels of analysis, the standard is low.

Level of analysis	Value	Description
Phonology	0	Same as level 1.
Morphology	½	Little knowledge of mass/count nouns distinctions.
Syntax	½	Characterised with poor knowledge of syntactic patterns such as agreement, tense and mechanics.
Semantics	½	Meaning can be made, but not without some difficulties as a result of inappropriate lexical forms.
Pragmatics	½	With the use of kinship terms, English concept formation is almost nil.
Total	2	Imperfect English

Level 3: The semi-formal variety

This variety is identified with people with post-primary education, who have been exposed, to some extent, to the workings of the English language.

Level of Analysis	Value	Description
Phonology	0	A great deal of mother tongue interference of segmental and aspects of supra-segmental features is discernible.
Morphology	1	There is a mastery of word-formation, inflections, mass/noun distinctions etc.
Syntax	½	A considerable improvement in sentence constructions is discernible
Semantics	½	Marked by a substantial improvement in meaning, cohesion and coherence.
Pragmatics	½	Low level of pragmatic competence coupled with kinship terms, idiomaticity, etc.
Total	2½	Sub-standard English

Level 4: The formal variety

This level belongs to those with post-secondary education. There is a considerable improvement above what operates at level three.

Level of Analysis	Value	Description
Phonology	½	As opposed to levels 1, 2 and 3. There is a substantial improvement or near perfection in segmental features; but with supra-segmental problems.
Morphology	1	A perfect mastery of word-formation, inflections and mass/count noun distinction applies here.
Syntax	1	Recognition and application of syntactic rules are characteristic of this category.
Semantics	1	Meaning is greatly improved upon with increased cohesion and coherence.
Pragmatics	½	There are still traces of pragmatic incompetence; also kinship terms, idiomaticity, etc. are discernible.
Total	4	Standard Nigerian English

Level 5: The super-formal variety

This level is marked by post-secondary education with native speaker exposure either by travel or deliberate modelling.

Level of Analysis	Value	Description
Phonology	1	There is a clear and distinct mastery of segmental and supra-segmental features of SBE.
Morphology	1	Marked by a perfect knowledge of word-formation, mass/count noun distinction etc.
Syntax	1	A perfect mastery of syntactic rules is the hallmark.
Semantics	1	Meaning is as well very perfect.
Pragmatics	½	Constrained by the Nigerian socio-cultural settings, pragmatic competence is marked by kinship terms, proverbs, idiomaticity, etc.
Total	4½	Standard English

*It is clear from the foregoing that five varieties of Nigerian English are distinguishable like the conventional five levels of linguistic analysis. The first level, the non-formal variety or Illiterate English is the poorest or lowest in ranking with 1.5 linguistic value. This is followed by the informal variety or Imperfect English, the linguistic value of which is 2, a value that is below the socially acceptable norm or average. Level 3 is that of semi-formal variety or Sub-standard English which is just average, common or general. It is the Formal Variety or Standard Nigerian English category that occupies Level 4, with its linguistic value being 4, a score that is very good both nationally and internationally, though not without some slight divergence from the Standard English. The super-formal variety or Standard English manifests in those who have overcome virtually all traces of non-nativeness through exposure or upbringing, with 4.5 as the value of the variety.

Standard Nigerian English

With such classifications as above, the notion of standardisation, a comprehensive description of, or reduction of particular language varieties to, orthography or graphisation of typical lects, in terms of grammar and other forms and structure (Kujore, 1990) has emerged. With most scholars asserting that standard Nigerian English is the model closest to the native speakers, mostly used by the elite, it fulfils the criteria of social acceptability and international intelligibility that characterise Banjo's Variety Three and our proposed Variety Four.

Describing this variety (Adejare cited in Adeniyi 2006:38-39) believes that Standard Nigerian English essentially fulfils the three conditions of grammaticality (adherence to the form and structure of Standard English), intelligibility (a phonological parameter that makes spoken standard possess sufficient features that will make it qualified like other standard varieties of the world. These features should be derived from the Received Pronunciation, which constitutes a reference point for most standard varieties) and acceptability (which concerns meaning and constitutes the domain where a greater degree of variation from other standards occurs because it is governed by the semiotics of Nigerian languages) (Adedimeji and Ojuade, 2009).

It is agreed that there is a Standard Nigerian English as opined by Akindele and Adegbite (1999:154) who say that it must pass the test of codification, acceptability, intelligibility and appropriateness. It is this standard that is adopted in the selected works under study as the writers have fulfilled the criteria without compromising the peculiar linguistic habits of the socio-cultural environment in which the language is used

Conclusion

Since the publication of Brosnahan's (1958) pioneering work in characterising the varieties of English used in Nigeria, various scholars have sought to clarify and espouse the Nigerian English phenomenon using various related or disparate parameters. Educational, occupational and aspects of linguistic and general considerations have often been used to differentiate the varieties of English used by Nigerians. The various

classifications have often been insightful but, nevertheless, not faultless, which has compelled the need for further investigations.

This study has attempted a broad review of the varieties of the English language used in Nigeria. It is submitted that a classification that addresses peculiar characteristics based on the five levels of linguistic analysis would be more insightful than those that focused on specific levels of language study or educational attainment, which do not actually represent faithfully the actual Nigerian English situation. The study identifies and describes five varieties of non-formal (illiterate English), informal (imperfect English), semi-formal (sub-standard) formal (standard Nigerian English) and super-formal. It submits that Standard Nigerian English is the formal variety which is the same with the Standard British English at all the levels of morphology, syntax and semantics and it is close to the British Standard at the levels of phonology and pragmatics. Essentially, Nigerians will continue to use Nigerian English unavoidably, but the only need is for scholars to make serious efforts towards standardising the formal variety and popularising it among Nigerians users so that deviant forms would be separated from the variant ones and a well-accepted variety would be adopted for information, education and other official facets of national life.

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