The question of standardization of Nigerian English

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Abstract

It is difficult to deny the existence of Nigerian English; just as it is equally difficult to deny the existence British English and American English. This claim arises from the fact, that what characterizes a people's language takes its rise from the totality of the people's cultural practices of which meaningful verbal sounds are of great essence. These meaningful verbal sounds serve as the chief instrument for communicating meanings, feelings, ideas, and abstractions. In this write up, we build up our argument on standardization of Nigerian English on the basis of the various stages which the language has passed through and is still passing through in Nigeria. We identify what a standard variety of Nigerian English is, and examine how efforts in standardizing it are being made through empirically reliable criteria.

Introduction

English Language was introduced into Nigeria with the coming of the Europeans around the 16th century, Awonusi,(2004:67). First, it was the language of trade along the coastal areas. Here it came in contact with local languages and this gave rise to Pidgin English then with the coming of the colonial masters and the missionaries. The language was implanted fully in the country via the educational ordinance of 1882, which made it the language of instruction in schools. Over the years, the language gained acceptance in the country and assumed functions in different domains. As the first official language in the country, it is used virtually in all domains, e.g. in official business, in legislature, in all government offices, in the administration of education. It is also used in non-governmental domains, such as in commerce and in journalism, also in literature and in most formal gatherings. It also serves as a restricted lingua franca.

In consideration of the facts above, it is appropriate to mention that English Language has displaced most indigenous languages by assuming functions hitherto performed by them. Invariably, it undergoes cultural adaptation and hybridity, Wolf and Igboanusi (2004). Arguably, English is no longer foreign to Nigeria. On account of Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature, English language is seen as a neutral language to promote national and ethnic cohesion, thereby giving it power and prestige, too. However, English language is seen as a second language in the Nigerian language situation, even though it now carries the load of mother tongues, ie. in terms of its use in virtually all domains. According to Akindele and

Adegibite (1991:51) "a second language is a variety in which a bi/multilingual person conducts his everyday activities but shares this role with another language in which the speaker has greater linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge".

Of interest is the word 'bi/multilingual' in the Akindele and Adegbite's definition of a second language: it calls to mind the reality of varieties of Nigerian English. Basically, the concept of variety of Nigerian English is associated with transfer of features of the languages of Nigerian learners of English to the target language, English.

Language is embedded in the culture of a people, which in turn encompasses their total world view. The peculiar multi-cultural nature of Nigeria necessitates a skewing of the language according to the particular needs of the people. It is in recognition of this fact that Jowitt, (1991:38) states that an obviously attractive parameter for determining varieties within Nigerian English is the ethnic criterion. Igboanusi (2002:33) recapitulates 'ethnic dialects of Nigerian English are determined by way of associating particular phonological, lexical, syntactic or semantic usage with particular ethnic groups'. In the light of the above, it is evident that what would characterize a standard Nigerian English would take its rise from the varieties of Nigerian English. In view of this, we shall investigate briefly the varieties of Nigeria English and their standards.

Varieties of Nigerian English and their standards

According to Egwuogu (2004; 103):

> Varieties of Nigerian English arise from the interaction of English language with the local languages and from the different ways speakers of a second language try to approximate the sounds of the language. It also occurs as a result of interference from the mother tongue (MT). Interference occurs at phonological, grammatical and semantic levels; even at the level of lexis, interference can still be noticed.

A deep re-examination of Egwuogu's view would indicate three criteria for evaluating varieties of Nigerian English, viz : internal criterion, which refers to phonological, syntactic and semantic structures of a variety of speech, functional criterion, which refers to the use to which the society makes of variety of speech and attitudinal criterion, which refers to the idea that a variety of speech may be perceived as unique to a particular language community. Putting these criteria into consideration and using ethnic, educational, and linguistic parameters, scholars have identified

different varieties of Nigerian English. According to Brosnahan (1958) four varieties of Nigerian English exist:

- Pidgin, which is used by people with no formal education.
- The variety used by those with only primary education.
- The variety used by those with secondary education.
- The variety used by those with university education

We may assume that at the time Brosnahan stipulated the four varieties certain higher institutions that award degrees like the NCE (National Certificate of Education), OND (Ordinary National Diploma) and HND (Higher National Diploma) were not existent in Nigeria. Institutes, technical colleges and TTC II (Teachers' Training College) were also in the same category, thereby giving credence to this claim. Essentially we want to point out that despite the considerable development we may claim that Pidgin English language has attained, it has not lost its congenital nature; in terms of aspects and tense formations, Pidgin English resembles African tone languages. The point being pursued here is that Pidgin ought not to have been described as a variety of English language. As a point of fact Pidgin has its own varieties, e.g. Warri Pidgin is different from Port-Harcourt one, which in turn is different from the one spoken in Lagos.

According to Banjo(1971,1996), the choice of an appropriate model for identifying varieties should be based on the twin criteria of social acceptability and international intelligibility on the assumption that such a model given the 2nd language situation should possess a high prestige at home and reasonable intelligibility abroad. Subsequently, Banjo, (1996:75-80) stipulated the following varieties:

Variety I: Nigerians who have picked up the language as a result of the exigencies of their occupation. Much of it can be described as "broken English".

Variety II, speech exhibits signs of systematic learning of English and its speakers are likely to have had at least primary education. Others may have had some secondary education as well and it represents the speech of most Nigerian bilingual speakers of English.

- Variety III, is the product of an even greater exposure to a standard variety of language and represents a standard use of English in Nigeria. In most cases the exposure is obtained through education.

Variety IV, includes Afro-Saxon to whom English is mother.

This diatypic (cf. Enkvist et al, 1964) classification of varieties of Nigerian English was described by Jowitt, (1991) as arbitrary. However, we want to add that despite its arbitrariness it is objective, empirical and consistent. Bamgbose, et al., (1995) also agree with Banjo (1971,1993).

This would suggest that variety III would ensure a standard which is both highly socially acceptable and maximally internationally intelligible.

The relationship of all this to the previous discussion is obvious. We are now in a position to define the speakers of Nigerian English more closely. It is however important to mention that standardization is not meant to fix the language once and for all in Nigeria, for one chief character of a language is that it is dynamic. Secondly the standard is not expected to be a rigid prototype but rather a cluster of diatypic varieties it will accommodate in informal register, for example slang, which is transient in nature, which may initially exist colloquially before it becomes a written form. In consonance with the immediate previous statement, Nigerian English encourages creativity.

We have established the fact that there is what is accepted as a standard Nigerian English, we would like to further substantiate the point by investigating the concept of standardization and finally correlate it with the question of standardization of Nigerian English.

The concept of standardization and the question of standardization of Nigerian English

Webster's New Basic Dictionary, (1997) defines standard as 'a measure to which others must conform'. In the classification of language varieties, the standard variety is usually delineated since it is the reference point for other variety within a speech community. According to Ekong, (1987): 'standardization is a process of codification and acceptance of a set of norms which define correct usage in a particular speech community'. From the above definition, we deduce that the chief characteristics of a standardized language is a document of laid down principles and rules guiding lexical (which includes orthography), phonological, semantic combinations in a language. The issue of acceptance presupposes intelligibility because no one is likely to accept a language one doesn't understand as a means of communication. So acceptance should be understood extensively as both intra- and international acceptance and intelligibility. To further underpin the thrust of the above definition, Akindele and Adegbite (1999; 136) state:

> The standard dialect is that variety associated with formal education and manifested in the speech and writing of educated elites. The variety is accorded social prestige because of its propensity to civilization and its wider acceptability by all speakers of the language.

Haugan, (1974:116) pointed out some feature to be put into consideration in language standardization: selection of norms, codification of form, elaboration of functions and acceptance by community. However Akindele &Adegbite (1999:136) provided their view in standardizing a language, the selection of features from a number of sub-varieties is inevitable. Among the various dialects, a standard dialect emerges, usually via a historical accident, rather than via selection or legislation. This explication seems to indicate that Banjo's variety III, the product of greater exposure to a standard use of English in Nigeria does not take its rise from any dialect in Nigerian history.

Nevertheless, we presume that Banjo takes into consideration that the speakers of variety III cut across the six geopolitical zones of the country and that at that level of linguistic exposure dialectal interference would have reduced to a point where it does not blur intra- and international intelligibility. Jubril, (1983, 1986) provides a linguistic evidence for many statements that have been made. In his investigation, he provided justification for recognizing two broad diatopic sub-varieties, namely Hausa and Southern. Within each diatopic sub-variety, he recognized on the basis of distance from or proximity to Standard British basic and sophisticated sub-varieties, which appear to be equivalent to Banjo's varieties II & III. He observed that a growing convergence between Basic Hausa and Basic Southern, so he suggested a fifth category, a Southern-influenced Hausa variety which he predicted may be the forerunner of a more homogenous Nigerian accent.

From what we have written so far, it is evident that the question of standardizing Nigerian English is not a new one and that, efforts are being made to standardize Nigerian English. Sequel to this, a recognized standard variety must be codified. There must be a codification of the phonological and grammatical rules. Similarly, there must be a dictionary of the language coded in the variety. All codified documents will remain as points of reference and also serve the purpose of correcting errors. As regards codification, a lot of work has been done in characterizing lexical, semantic indexical markers of (standard) Nigerian English than on syntactic or phonological markers. For instance, Bamgbose (1971;43-4) draws attention to the semantic changes that have taken place in some varieties of Nigerian English in such words as 'themselves', 'globe', 'to take in'; 'a been to'. According to Banjo (1995;214):

> It appears to be generally recognized that it is in the lexical semantic area together with distinctive idiomatic expressions that Nigerian English is likely to make a real contribution to the development of the

English Language world wide, and so research has been intensified in this area, not only in thesis and dissertations, but also in publications.

To further underpin this point, Igboanusi, (2002), wrote a dictionary of Nigerian English usage, which is a great contribution to English Language in general. Odumuh (1984: 155-228) provides a very thorough inquiry into the syntactic and lexical properties of the Nigerian English. He discusses a large number of lexical items and expressions which have undergone semantic change in Nigerian usage and compares them with usage in British Standard English (BSE) ; a few examples are ;

BSE	NIGERIAN ENGLISH
• academic	academician
• wealthy woman.	cash madam
• traffic snarl-up	go slow
• undue influence	long leg.

In the area of syntax, a lot of work has equally been done by various authors such as Tomori, (1967); Odumu, (1981), Kujore, (1985), Jowitt, (1991), it appears, is more systematic in this regard. His categorization can be regarded as typical and is briefly summarized below:

- Classification: This deal with form-class shift. E.g. 'he *offed* the light'. (which must be variety I or variety II, but not variety III).
- The number system: This concerns the pluralization of such SBE uncountable nouns as 'advice', 'equipment'. (These incidentally are also pluralized in American English); 'junk' and 'personnel'
- Inflections: examples 'he *used* to drink too much'; 'did she *wanted* him?' (This must belong to the lowest brands of variety I).
- Sub-categorization of verbs, SBE stative verbs 'hear', 'smell', used as event verbs in Nigerian English.
- The use of prepositions generally.
- Modals; e.g. Nigerian English – 'after the referee *might have* arrived, the match will begin': For SBE – 'after the referee has arrived...
- The wide spread use, even in some variety III usage, of the reflexive 'themselves', where SBE would use the reciprocals 'each other/ one another'.
- Relativization; e.g. Nigerian English – 'I know the person who his father has died'. For SBE – 'I know the person whose father has died'.

These syntactic anomalies in Nigerian English call to mind the concept of 'common core' features in English language. According to Quirk, et al. (1972; 13), 'The concept of Englishness consist in a common core or nucleus, which can be termed 'English'. It is essentially the common core features of English that impact a high degree of uniformity on the various varieties of world 'Englishes' so that they are mutually intelligible despite the phonological, lexical and grammatical differences that may exist among them. What Quirk's common core features portend for the standardization and particularly codification of Nigerian English is that the standard Nigerian English should be free from all errors of grammar, pronunciation, spelling and punctuation. According to Quirk (1962: 99) some common core features of English include the conventions of English orthography, the grammar of English and the English vocabulary, which are presented in the lexicon of the language.

Consequently, all standard varieties of English are expected to obey the general rules of English grammar. However, we must mention that since the greatest influence on English in Nigeria is the socio-cultural context in which it is used, the influences of indigenous languages on English should be seen as possible signs of healthy adaptation and hybridity and of the creative capability that we normally associate with mother tongue learning and use. Thus Igboanusi(2002;35) states "nativisation is a common features of all institutionalized second language varieties of English". The point being pursued here is that while we agree that the common core features of SBE should be the pillars upon which Nigerian English is built, Nigerian English ought to retain its local color, which of course is its major identity.

In the realm of pragmatics, a lot of research has equally been conducted and documented, Bamgbose (1971;44) draws attention to the use of words such as 'sorry' and 'well done' as phatic communion, but in SBE, they have different situational and semantic applications. Adetugbo; (1979a and b) provides further example in relation to deployment of structure and lexis between Nigerian English and SBE or American English (AE). Akere (1986) discusses the sociological determinants of the indigenization of the English language in Nigeria. In all these works, the lexis is a common feature of the SBE but the senses in which it is used are definitely indexical markers of non-standard usage, and according to Banjo, (1995;28) 'there is however, a great scope for further divergence between Nigerian English and British English(BE) or American English (AE) in this respect, where, as in lexis, the cultural environment put an indelible stamp on the language". Chinua Achebe's use of transliteration in his novels is a

typical example. That is some common core features may assume semantic expansion/extension in Nigerian English.

In the realm of phonology, researches have equally been carried out and documented. Prominent among them are the ones of Jubril (1982) and Adetugbo (2004;179-197). Adetugbo delineates the phonological problems of standardization of Nigerian English and subcategorized them as follows; Vocalism, Consonantism, Syllable Structure, Stress and Intonation. The bottom line of phonological problems in standardizing Nigerian English bears on the phonologically delimited dialects of Nigerian English. However, while we see interference features as phonologically significant in Nigerian English, we must admit that these features are yielding to the establishment of a standard. Other criteria for standardizing a language variety such as intelligibility and acceptance have been discussed within the ambit of this write up.

Summary and conclusion

We have concisely recounted the history of English language in Nigeria. We have equally examined the views of various authors on varieties of Nigerian English, on what ought to be the standard Nigerian English and took side with the popular view, Banjo's view. Through a careful examination of the issue, we observed that Nigerian English is on course for standardization.

Finally, we would like to observe that the standardization is still at its elementary stage. Therefore more effort should be made towards improving on the works already done. For example, a dictionary of Nigerian English should have phonetic transcriptions of words in addition to the meanings of words and their applications. Secondly, there should be grammar books on Nigerian English which based its explanations on the common core features of the British English. Essentially, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should encourage Nigerian English language development through conferences, seminars, grants and scholarships.

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