

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF THE ENGLISH USAGE OF IGBO-ENGLISH BILINGUALS

Nwachukwu Dorathy U.

Department of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

The study investigated the spread and consistency of the use of Nigerian English lexical and syntactic forms among Igbo-English bilinguals from different socio-educational strata. Specifically, the author seeks to explore the various points at which the highly educated and the less educated Igbo-English bilinguals diverge and converge in their use of English. The data used for the study were sought primarily through questionnaire and observation of natural speech events. The study sample size was one hundred. The findings of the study reveal that in spite of variations in the use of English by the highly educated and the less educated subjects, there are also convergences. Convergences in the use of English by the highly educated and the less educated speakers of Nigerian English in the first instance, attest to their status as L2 speakers of English, operating within the same sociolinguistic and cultural contexts. Secondly, they provide evidence of the tendency for Nigerians (the educated and the less educated alike) to deviate from native speakers of English in their use of English, and, thirdly, they provide the bases for the selection of NE features for codification.

Introduction

It is undeniable that English has been totally domesticated, nativized, indigenized or localized in Nigeria (Adegbija, 2004). For instance, the expressions ‘to be on seat’, ‘a man of timbre and calibre’, ‘to have long leg’, ‘bush meat’, ‘cash madam’, ‘pepper soup joint’ (to mention but a few) can be easily identified as Nigerian English (henceforth NE) usage. Thus, it has become common knowledge that the variety of English spoken and written by Nigerians diverges, from native dialects of the language as well as from other non native dialects of the language.

NE has been extensively discussed in many scholarly publications (Adetugbo, 1977; Akere, 1978; Adekunle, 1979; Jibril, 1982; Awonusi, 1985; Odumuh, 1987; Jowitt, 1991) and a host of others. However, as much as has been documented on the dialect so far, little has been done to give it a concrete definition. Defining what constitutes NE requires investigations into the extent to which its linguistic features are used by its speakers from diverse socio-ethnic and educational backgrounds.

The current study, therefore, attempts to investigate the frequency and use of the various linguistic features of the NE dialect among Igbo-English bilinguals. Speakers of Igbo in Nigeria constitute a significant population of the Nigerian English (NE) speech community judging from the inclusion of Igbo as one of the nation’s major languages. It is therefore hoped that a study of this sort will, firstly, help to fill the gap in knowledge on NE from the ethnic perspective and, secondly, accelerate the codification of the dialect.

The Concept of Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics as a field of research is founded on the proposition that language is a social phenomenon. A widely held view among sociolinguists is that, language and society are intimately and inextricably related and that investigations into language should be able to offer

explanations about such a relationship (Trudgill, 1983; Yule, 1996; Hudson, 1996; Holmes, 2008; Wardhaugh, 1993). According to Yule (1996), insights into language and language behaviour can only be gained if attention is paid to the uses and users of language and the socio-cultural parameters which condition linguistic behaviour in various communities. Holmes (2008) agrees with this view by observing that no theory of language can provide meaningful insights into language if it does not have something to say about the uses and users of language. The human language exhibits a great deal of variation given the social diversity of the people who use it and the uses they subject it to. Sociolinguists account for the effects of these social differences on linguistic behaviour. In other words, they are interested in explaining linguistic variation.

The Notion of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is one of the themes in Sociolinguistics which have been generously investigated. Surprisingly, however, the term has continued to be faced with definitional ambiguities. For instance, while Bloomfield (1933:56) defines it as “the native-like control of two languages”, Haugen (1966) also defines it as ‘the ability to produce meaningful utterances in two languages’. Haugen’s view provokes the important question of what constitutes a meaningful and complete utterance?. For example a single word can be adjudged to be complete and meaningful if uttered in response to a question as in the following:

A: Who is in my room upstairs?

B: Lilian

In the context of the above, the word ‘Lilian’ conveys a complete thought -It is Lilian that is in your room. This therefore suggests that an individual who produces intelligible utterances such as the above can be adjudged to be bilingual.

Mackey (1972) extends the scope of bilingualism by defining it as a state where more than one language code operates. In other words, both individuals and communities whose linguistic repertoire exceeds one are describable as bilinguals. Adetugbo (1977) agrees fully with Mackey and adds that “the effects of alternatively using more than one language are similar for the bilingual or multilingual”. It is interesting to note that bilingual and multilingual contexts share common linguistic features. These features include: code switching, borrowing, interference and biculturalism.

Li Wei (2000) quoted in Shodiye ((2010) asserts that Bilingualism is a direct product of languages in contact. Language is a major possession of man which continues to expand as he comes into contact with others either for religious, socio-economic, political etc reasons. Languages in contact situation represent one of the factors of linguistic variation.

Nigerian English

The contact between English and the various Nigerian local languages has produced the national dialect of English referred to as Nigerian English (NE). This variety has been observed to exhibit distinct features.

Features of Nigerian English

Features of NE have been discussed in several scholarly publications (Adetugbo, 1977; Bamgbose, 1995; Jibril, (1982); Kujore, 1985; Awonusi, 1985; Odumuh, 1987; Banjo, 1996; Jowitt, 1991; Bamiro, 1994; Daramola, 2004; Okoro, 2004,2010).

Lexis

At the lexical level, NE is identifiable with features such as:

- (a.) Coinages e.g. 'go -slow', 'bush meat', 'boys' quarter', 'head-tie', 'low current', 'business centre', 'area boys'.
- (b.) Acronyms e.g. PDP, APC, NTA, EFCC, GLO, NAFDA
- (c.) Loans e.g. 'egusi', 'akara', 'buba', 'danshiki', 'suya'

Okoro (2010) observes the use of certain words in NE which are derived through faulty analogy. Words in this category include: followership, cheater, stinkingly (rich), plumpy.

Syntax

Syntactic variations in NE result from the transference of structural patterns of Nigerian languages on English. NE syntax is said to differ from that of Standard British English (SBE) in the following ways:

Variant Use of Prepositions

According to Bamgbose (1995) Nigerians may use a preposition where native speakers will avoid it, omit it where native speakers may use one or even use a different preposition in contexts where it is required. Instances of prepositional misuse in NE are illustrated below.

- (a) Intrusive Use of Prepositions e.g. voice out (We have to voice out our opinion rather than die in silence.)
discuss about (The family discussed about the issue last night.)
demand for (The Mafia boys demanded for the release of their members.)
- (b) Prepositional Substitution e.g.
Congratulate for (congratulate on)
in flying colours (with flying colours)
to sleep on a bed (to sleep in a bed)
to come with a car (to come in a car)
to be good at say, Mathematics (to be good in Mathematics)
- (c) Deletion or omission of prepositions e.g. to condole a bereft family (condole with), to dispose say, a car (dispose of a car), reply a letter (reply to a letter)

Class Shift

Class shift involves the ascription of syntactic properties of a word class to a word which belongs to another class. Common instances of class shift in NE are those of shifts from:

- a. Adjective to Verb e.g. You are a matured man.
- b. Adjective to Noun e.g. She is an illiterate.
- c. Noun to Verb e.g. Horn before overtaking.
- d. Preposition/Adverb to Verb e.g. The robbers ordered the driver to off the car ignition.
- e. Preposition/Noun to Verb e.g. Why did you minus N10 from my salary?

Other instances of class shift which are commonly found in NE are the sub-categorization of nouns and verbs such as in:

- (i) Pluralization of Non Count Nouns e.g. jewelries, underwears, luggages, equipments, ammunitions, stationeries.

Dadzie (2004) also points out that some nouns with plural forms have the tendency to be given singular counterparts in Nigerian English e.g. pant, fund, plier, trouser.

- (ii) Dynamic Use of Stative Verbs as in ‘I am hearing you’. ‘The pupils were not seeing the board’.
- (ii) Intransitive Use of Transitive Verbs e.g. They enjoyed. (They enjoyed themselves.) They are discussing. (They are discussing say, the matter.)

Variant Use of Determiners

- (i) Omission of Determiners before singular count nouns e.g.

She has bought car. (She bought a car.)

I will like to take orange. (I will like to take an orange.)

The man died of stroke. (The man died of a stroke.)

- (e) Double Use of Adjective/Adverb Inflections

I am the most happiest man on earth.

Your new car is more better than the former.

Other features of NE syntax are:

- a. Redundancies e.g. now, now; fast, fast; slowly, slowly; 4PM in the afternoon; night vigil; burial ceremony.
- b. Variant Use of Tag Questions e.g. Your uncle likes rice, isn’t it?’ (Your uncle likes rice, doesn’t he?)

The measurable influence of the various Nigerian indigenous languages on the English of their speakers and that of the general NE has, in the last few years moved into the realms of linguistic description. Concepts such as Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa etc English are of common use in the current literature of NE Odumuh (1987). Igboanusi (2001) for instance, posits that although most features of NE syntax are shared by ethnic varieties, some are predominant among particular ethnic groups. He observes for instance, that the duplication of adverbs and determiners which yield expressions such as fast, fast, now, now, slowly, slowly etc are characteristic of Igbo speakers of English. He also, observes that the use of double subjects or focus constructions exemplified by the expression ‘The man, he is not the one to blame’ are peculiar to speakers of Igbo. Ezejideaku and Ugwu (2009) classify the linguistic behaviour of Igbo speakers of English into four categories: Igbo English proper, composed of English vocabulary in Igbo sentence structures; Engligbo, a form of code switching that is almost fifty-fifty blend of English and Igbo; translation in which Igbo idiomatic and other rhetorical expressions are transferred literally into English; and errors, induced by the influence of Igbo on English (Ezejideaku and Ugwu 2009:5).

In recent times, linguists’ attention has been drawn to the exigency of codification of the dialect as an endorsement to its membership of the New Englishes family. This is where the current study finds its relevance.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To establish areas of divergence (if any) in the English usage of the highly educated and the less educated Igbo-English bilinguals;
2. To investigate areas of convergence (if any) in the English usage of the highly educated and the less educated Igbo-English bilinguals.

Population and sample

The population of the study comprises the entire Igbo-English bilinguals; nevertheless, the sample consists of one hundred Igbo-English bilinguals of differing socio-educational background. The sample population cut across fifty highly educated and fifty less educated subjects. For the purposes of the study, subjects who possess at least, a first degree or its equivalent from an accredited tertiary institution in and outside Nigeria are deemed to be highly educated while subjects whose educational attainment is below first degree or its equivalent are taken to be less educated. The sample was constituted through the stratified sampling method. Parameters for stratification were: age (15 years and above), state of origin (Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi). Other considerations include duration of residence (a minimum of ten years) in any of the five core Igbo states (Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi), speaking Igbo as a Native Language or Mother Tongue (MT) and as the first language in the series of acquisition that is as First Language (L1) in addition to being proficient in Igbo and English only.

Data

The data for the study were drawn from lexical and syntactic features of Nigerian English. These include the use of loans, omission of determiners before singular countable nouns, invariant use of tag questions, absence of verb and noun inflections, reduplication, pluralization of mass nouns and dynamic use of stative verbs. Constructions which reflect the features were presented along with their Standard British English equivalents. The respondents were required to indicate on the questionnaire which of the variant expressions they use in their daily speech. Three (3) questions were drawn from each of the features investigated.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1 below displays the responses of the highly educated and the less educated subjects. It shows that the highest rate of divergences between the two groups is found in their use of verb inflections. It shows that, while the highly educated subjects used 33(22%) verbs uninflected for tense, the less educated subjects used 114 (76%). Other areas of divergence as shown in the table include the use of noun inflections 35 (23%) and 105 (70%) for the highly educated and less educated subjects respectively. For deviant lexical conversion, the highly educated subjects used 54 (36%) words wrongly converted to other word classes (such as the conversion of verbs to nouns) while the less educated subjects used 120 (80%). In the areas of subject-verb agreement, the highly educated subjects recorded 30 (20%) cases while the less educated subjects had 99 (66%) subjects whose verbs were not in agreement in either the number or person or person of the subject. The table also shows that the highly educated subjects recorded 51 (34%) wrong choices of words while the less educated subjects had 114 (76%).

For the use of tag questions, the highly educated subjects used 68 (45%) wrong tags while the less educated had 116 (77%). In the use of pronominals, we had 51 (34%) occurrence of wrong proforms as substitutes for nouns and noun phrases for the highly educated and

106(71%) for the less educated subjects. Our analysis of the use of double adverb/ adjective inflections shows 59 (39%) for the highly educated and 111 (74%) for the less educated. In class shift, the highly educated subjects used 56 (37%) of words ascribed grammatical features of another word class in English while the less educated subjects used 107 (71%).

TABLE 1: Divergences in the use of English of the Highly Educated and Less Educated Subjects

Nigerian English Forms	Frequency in (%)	
	Highly Educated	Less Educated
The Use of Verb Inflections	22	76
The Use of Noun Inflections	23	70
The Use of Subject-Verb Agreement	20	66
Deviant Lexical Conversion	36	80
Choice of Lexes	34	76
The Use of Tag Questions	45	77
The Use of Pronominals	34	71
The Use of Double Adverb/Adjective Inflections	39	74
Class Shift	37	71

The information above is captured in the following clustered columns.

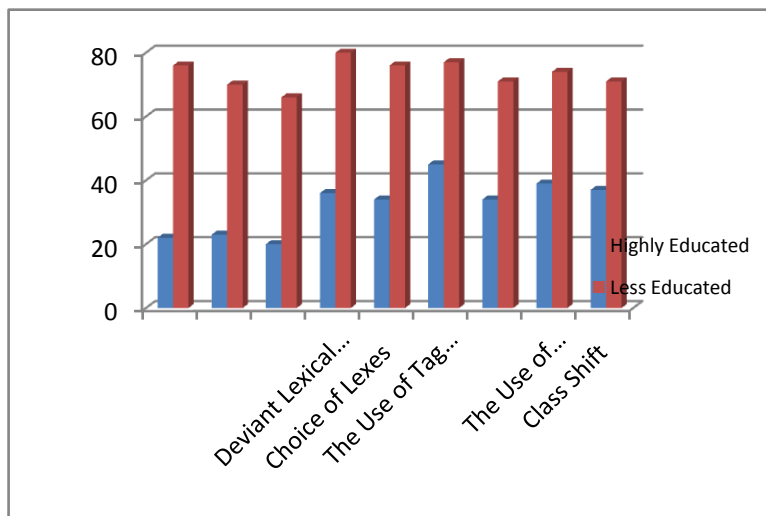


Figure 1: Clustered columns displaying divergences in the use of English of the highly educated and the less educated subjects

Table 2 below displays convergent patterns in the English usage of the highly educated and less educated subjects. The table shows that the highest level of similarity in the English usage of the two groups is found in their use of loans with 150 (100%) occurrence for each group. It also indicates a similarity in their use of coinages with a frequency of 107 (71%) and 110 (73%) for the highly and less educated subjects respectively. For the omission of determiners, it shows 102 (68%) for the highly educated and 107 (71%) for the less educated. For distortion of collocational patterns, the highly educated subjects used 120 (80%) verbs with prepositions other than those they naturally go with in SBE while the less educated subjects used 126 (84%).

The table also indicates a similarity in the use of stative verbs among the highly educated and less educated subjects. It shows that the highly educated subjects used 111 (74%) stative verbs in the progressive form; similarly, the less educated subjects used 119 (79%). For the pluralization of mass nouns, the highly educated subjects used 105 (70%) non count nouns inflected for number and the less educated subjects used 113 (75%). The table also shows that both the highly educated and less educated expressed politeness in a similar manner. It shows 75 (50%) for each of the groups. For reduplication, it shows that the highly educated subjects used 105 (70%) redundant words and the less educated 114(76%). In the use of prepositions, the highly educated subjects used 101 (67%) deviant prepositions while the less educated subjects used 111 (74%). The marginal difference between the highly educated and less educated subjects' use of prepositions is indicative of the seeming difficulty prepositions pose to Nigerian learners of English.

Table 2: Convergences in the use of English of the Highly Educated and Less Educated Subjects

Nigerian English Forms	Frequency in (%)	
	Highly Educated	Less Educated
Loan Transfers	100	100
Coinages	71	73
Omission of Determiners	68	71
Distortion of collocational patterns	80	84
Pluralization of Mass Nouns	70	75
Dynamic Use of Stative Verbs	74	79
Forms of Polite Usage	50	50

Reduplication	70	76
Variant Use of Prepositions	67	74

The above information is captured in the following clustered columns.

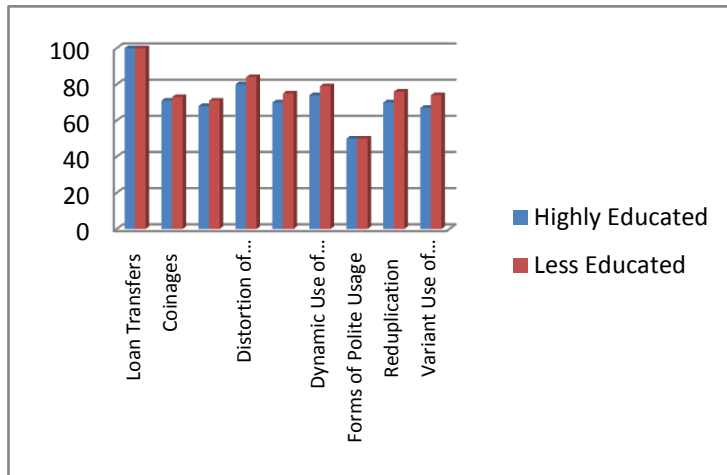


Fig.2: Clustered columns displaying convergences in the use of English of the highly educated and the less educated subjects

Findings

Our analysis of the divergences reveals that certain usage patterns such as absence of verb and noun inflections, breach of concord rules, re-classification of words (class shift) and wrong use of pronominals represent the core areas of dissimilarity in the English usage of the highly educated and the less educated subjects. Discrepancies in the English usage of the highly educated and the less educated speakers of NE are most often attributed to differences in the level of formal English pedagogy received by each group. Studies on NE usage (Jowitt 1991, Awonusi 1986, Brosnahan 1958) have most often reported a close relationship between English usage in Nigeria and educational attainment. The fact that English is studied at all levels of education in the country predisposes people with long duration of exposure to formal pedagogy to acquire high proficiency in the language. The teaching and learning of English in Nigerian schools are systematically planned with periodic evaluation of learning outcomes. With such a mechanism in place, it is generally believed that educated NE speakers are more likely to acquire higher proficiency in English than their less educated counterparts. In line with previous researches, this study has demonstrated that educational attainment is a determining factor in English proficiency acquisition among Igbo-English bilinguals, and by extension, among NE speakers.

This study has demonstrated that, educational attainment does not constitute an absolute boundary in the English usage of the highly educated and the less educated NE speakers. From the perspective of convergences, our analysis reveals that certain forms of usage are common to both the highly educated and the less educated subjects. Table2, for instance, discloses that both the highly educated and the less educated subjects dropped the obligatory determiners which precede singular count nouns in English - a phenomenon explicable by the contrast between the

Igbo and English Phrase Structure (PS) Rules. While the determiner element is obligatory in the English PS rules, it is optional in Igbo. Thus, while English has a Noun Phrase structure expressed as Determiner + Noun, Igbo has Noun+ (Noun) + (Determiner). The view taken by the author is in consonance with that of Oniemayin (2012) who observes that certain usage patterns in NE have gained permanence as manifestations of the ‘newness’ of the Nigerian socio-cultural and linguistic contexts in which English currently functions. By implication, such ‘fossilised’ usages which though, are not in conformity with native speakers’ usages should be considered as representing ‘pure’ instances of NE usage.

Conclusion

The paper investigated the linguistic behaviour of Igbo-English bilinguals vis-a-vis their use of Nigerian English lexical and syntactic forms. The study established that the less educated and the highly educated Igbo-English bilinguals do not out rightly diverge in their English usage. Common areas of usage in the English of the highly and the less educated are most unlikely to be restricted to Lexis and Syntax. It is hoped that, if similar studies are carried out in other domains of language usage such as Semantics and Phonology, the true character of the NE dialect will ultimately emerge.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the current study will accelerate the codification of NE if similar studies are carried out using members of other ethno-linguistic groups in the nation particularly, the minority ones whom, little or nothing has been documented about their linguistic behaviour in relation to English.

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