REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN ENGLISH IN NIGERIA AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS TEACHING AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

By
O. A. Idowu
Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo.

Abstract

The paper focuses on regional or local variations in English in Nigeria with particular reference to spoken English in which the variations are most noticeable. The three major Nigerian languages - Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa are referred to mainly in consideration of the local variations in English. The variations are seen as inevitable because of the nature of the Nigerian society. The different phonological, lexical and syntactic variations peculiar to the different local environments are discussed. Language interlarding between the regional language and English is also considered in relation to lexical variations. Finally, the paper recommends that the language teacher should focus on the areas of difference between the local languages and English for contrastive studies in order to make the teaching easier. Also the paper suggests that the different local accents or varieties of English in Nigeria should be brought together and standardized in order to eventually evolve a Nigerian Standard English (NSE).

Introduction

English is a heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration. However, it is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, literature, the mass media, internal and external communication in Nigeria. In practice therefore, English is the only effective medium of communication among Nigerians from different linguistic backgrounds; for it is estimated that there are about 400 different local languages in Nigeria. Three of these languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) are often referred to as the major languages of the country; but very few people speak more than one of these three languages.

The multi-lingual nature of the Nigerian society leads to many regional variations in their use of English because the different local languages have their accents directly or indirectly transferred to English. So, we have majority speaking the Nigerian English (NE) as it can be tagged, with different accents. The term 'Nigerian English' has come to be recognized and accepted as referring to a legitimate sub-type of English, which is peculiar to Nigeria.

For effective communication, we adjust our language behaviour according to who we are (user); what we are using it for (use); and the context in which we are communicating (situation). In essence, each of us in Nigeria uses language behaviours derived from the region or locality in which we were born or we live in. These variations manifest themselves in intonation and pronunciation (accent) in speech and writing (vocabulary and syntax). As it is assumed that a ready measure of proficiency in English is educational attainment, these regional varieties of English are influenced by one's level of educational attainment. This ranges from school to University education. One then asks the questions: Where does one draw the line? Should the primary school leaver be considered a speaker of English? Or should we consider only those
people who have received University education? The corollary to these is that even some highly educated people in Nigeria still speak sub-standard English, and it is difficult to draw a line.

It is worth noting that for a great number of people, even in the British Isles where English is their mother tongue, the dialect of English they learn to speak in childhood is a local or regional dialect and accent. To them, that is what English is. It is only later usually at school that they are introduced to Standard English as the socially agreed vehicle for educated and international communication. In a country like Nigeria where English is a second language, it is to be expected that the kinds of English found will be from the varieties peculiar to the different local languages. Grieve (1965) opined that the point about English in Nigeria is not just that it is different from British or American English, but rather that there are several varieties of English ranging from something very near standard English to the patois of the market place.

Each local or regional variety of English in Nigeria has its own characteristics especially in phonology and lexis. Certain pronunciations are identified with members of an ethnic group and when all or most of the markers of the group's accents are present in a particular speaker, one can be fairly certain that the speaker in question is a member of that ethnic group by birth or by upbringing, or both. Members of several ethnic groups residing in adjacent parts to one another in the country share many characteristics in their spoken English. In this way, Yoruba speakers of English tend generally to be easily identified by their common ways of pronouncing certain English consonants and vowels and by the rhythm of their speech. So do speakers of Edo, Efik, Tiv, Igbo and Hausa; they have their own peculiar characteristics in spoken English.

**Variations in the Spoken Form**

The regional variations in English in Nigeria are embedded mainly in the spoken form of the language. The greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerians is from the sound systems of the regional languages. According to Bamgbose (1971), most of the phonetic characteristics in the English of Nigerian can be traced to the transfer of features from their local languages. An example of such a typical feature is that Igbo speakers of English, even well-educated ones, tend to transfer the vowel system of their language into English. They usually pronounce /folo/ for the word 'follow' instead of /folw/ because the sequence of /o/ and /o/ in two successive syllables is not permissible in Igbo. The Igbo speakers of English also found of pronouncing /proler/ for the word 'problem' instead of /problem/ thus replacing /o/ with /o/. Hausa speakers of English tend to replace /p/ with /f/ in words like 'people', 'problem', 'pyramid' and so on. They tend to pronounce /fi:fl/, /froblem/ instead of /pi:pl/, /problems/ and /piromid/. They also tend to insert a vowel between a syllable-final consonant and the initial consonant of an immediately following syllabic. For instance, /rezigineisn/ instead of /rezignesp/ for the word 'resignation'.

In the same way, Hausa speakers of English also realize the dental fricatives /t/ and /d/ as /s/ and /z/ which are alveolar fricatives. They tend to pronounce /sin/ instead of /oin/ for the word 'thin' and /zo/ instead of /do/ for the word 'the'. An interesting example according to Bamgbose (1971) is the case of the phonemic distinction between /i:/ and /l/ as in 'seat' and 'sit', 'bead' and 'bid'.

Most Yoruba speakers of English do not make this distinction because it does not exist in their first language. Also, they generally nasalize English vowels, which are preceded by nasal consonants, for example, they pronounce /morin/ instead of /m2:nig/ for the word 'morning'. Some other variations in English are due to Yoruba dialectal interference. For example, an Ekiti speaker of English usually pronounces /sa1ld/ instead of /tsa1ld/ for the word 'child', while an Ibadan or Ijesa speaker of English usually pronounces /sua/ instead of /sua/ for the word 'sure'.


Generally, most Yoruba speakers of English pronounce the following words faultily: /feri/ instead of /veri/ for the word ‘very’, /t2:t/ instead of /Axt/ for the word ‘thought’ /deio/ instead of /ded/ for the word ‘there’ etc. All these are due to the fact that the phonemes M, /v/, /0/ and /d/ are not present in Yoruba phonology; so, they tend to replace these sounds with others that are near to them in Yoruba phonology.

On this, Ubahakwe (1979) contended that it has been observed that there is a great deal of similarity not only in the English accents of all the Southern Nigerian ethnic groups like: Edo, Efik, Tiv, Igbo and Yoruba, but also all along the West Coast of Africa. Similarly, as one moves up North, one notices a great deal of similarity in the English spoken by members of the numerous ethnic groups who inhabit the area, like: Kanuris, Fulani, Hausa etc.

In a language contact situation such as exists in Nigeria, it is to be expected that there will be an interaction between the local languages and English which leads to regional variations of the second language (English). The influence of the local languages on English is more relevant here - in that the patterns of the languages phonological, lexical and grammatical tend to be transferred into English.

**Variations in the Lexical and the Grammatical Forms**

There are some variations in the use of English Language in Nigeria, which could be noticed in the lexical and the grammatical aspects. According to Bamgbose (1971), some of the more common lexical forms include borrowings like 'kiakia bus' (a Volkswagen bus; kiakia' is a Yoruba word for 'quickly', and this is so named because it goes very fast). This is an example of the mixture of English with vernacular expressions which linguists call 'language interlarding'. We also have it in idiom translations like the common greetings exchanged by two people on meeting each other: 'How? ' 'Not bad'; which is a near translation of the Igbo; 'kedu?' 'odimma' ('How are you?' 'It is fine').

There is another example like: 'I hear the smell'. The word 'hear' is a literal translation of Yoruba word Igbo' or Hausa word 'ji' which means 'hear'. Sometimes, the translation is indirect. This varies from region to region.

On the level of syntax and semantics, the variations could be noticed in the translation of different local proverbs and expressions into English. Examples could be found in novels of Nigerian writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Aluko, Okara, Ekwensi etc who are from different regions in Nigeria. Let us consider the following: (i) 'the lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did', (ii) 'you can tell a ripe corn by its look' (Achebe, 1958:18).

Also, in Okara's *The voice*, we have this proverb: 'If you roast a bird of the air before a fowl, the fowl's head aches' (p.89). We also have the following sentence extracted from a letter written by a son to his father in Aluko's *one man one matched*: It is with much gladness in my heart that I write this letter to you', (p.51). In Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, we have the following: 'The pot that will eat fat, its bottom must be scorched'. These examples show that though they are all writing in English, there is the glaring influence of their local languages on the structures of their sentences and in the type of images they used.

The regional languages have different influences on English language because of both positive and negative transfer of their accents into English, though the varieties still manifest the same 'langue' of the English language. Grieve (1965) opined that the problem posed by the co-existence of these varieties is probably most keenly felt by examiners of English who are found to
decide between 'right' and 'wrong' English. However, on the whole, the attitude of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) has been that, while Standard English should form the basis of examinations and tests, varieties (which experiences have shown are acceptable to educated members of the appropriate community) may be accepted for examination purposes.

But the questions one will ask are: How much local or regional variation should be accepted? What is genuinely a regional variant and what is merely an error? How much regional variation can be allowed without reducing the ability of the Nigerian speaker or user of English to communicate effectively with users of English from other countries? What pronunciation model should teachers aim at?

On these, Bamgbose (1971) explained that it is generally agreed that the aim is not to produce speakers of British Received Pronunciation (RP) (even if this were possible), but to evolve a local variety of English pronunciation such as will satisfy the minimum requirements of national and international intelligibility. In view of the existence of Nigerian languages along side English, which causes regional variations according to Bamgbose (1971), the suggestion has often been made in the legislatures and also in the newspapers that the country should decide on a national language, it is generally agreed that the choice should be between one of the regional languages and English.

The problem of choosing a national language has been so complex since the first Republic that the governments have so far been avoiding taking any decision on the issue because of the multi-lingual nature of the country. The prospect for the foreseeable future is that a decision on the question will continue to be avoided. This means that English will still remain the Nigerian national and official language, and this buttresses the suggestion that the regional varieties of English in Nigeria should be brought together and standardized so that a standard Nigerian variety of English (SNE) will evolve eventually.

Recommendations and Conclusion

From the brief account of the regional variation in English in Nigeria, certain recommendations and conclusions may be made and drawn. The first goes to the teachers of English in our schools and colleges. The paper recommends that the teachers should focus mainly on the areas of dissimilarity between the regional languages and English for contrastive studies. This focus should be on the areas of phonology, lexis, syntax and semantics. More assistance should be given to learners in the areas of dissimilarity between English and the local languages in order to facilitate learning and mastering the used of the language.

Secondly, since it is apparent that English has been firmly established as a second language in Nigeria bearing in mind that it is the official language, and it is likely to remain so for a long time, the paper supports the suggestion of earlier linguists, that the regional varieties which are inevitable, should be brought together and standardized for our use in Nigeria. This will serve as our lingua franca. This is in line with what Salami (1968) stressed, that with time, many of the features of the regional varieties are likely to become stable and eventually standardized which will result in the emergence of a distinct Nigerian variety of English, probably associated with a certain level of education.

References

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