Nigerian English

GRACE EBUNLOLA ADAMO

Is it – can it be – part of a quest for cultural expression and identity?

THE PRESENT form of the English language in Nigeria is the outcome of its contact with the indigenous languages of the region: a confirmation of the truism that languages in contact influence each other. When English was initially introduced through trade, then entrenched through colonialism, it was 'derobed' of its British flavour. Paradoxically, such a state of affairs brings to mind a statement by Enoch Powell, a professor of Classics and former Conservative member of the British Parliament, who noted, rather eccentrically: 'Others may speak and read English – more or less – but it is our language, not theirs. It was made in England by the English and it remains our distinctive property, however widely it is learnt or used' (as quoted in Kujore 1995:367).

Introduction

Considering the adventurous nature of the original users of the language themselves, we may not agree that English 'remains' their 'distinctive property'. Certainly they cannot any longer claim *complete* ownership, because in every environment with which it has come into contact – in effect in which it has been *implanted* – English has taken on the socio-cultural trappings of the milieu.

So the question of whether English has been domesticated, or indigenized, or nativized in Nigeria (cf. Adegbija 1998 & 2004) is no longer an issue, because it has been thoroughly discussed (cf. Bamigbose 1982, 1995, Adegbija 1998, Banjo 1996, & Adetugbo 1977) and there is no gainsaying the fact that English has itself (to a certain extent at least) become a Nigerian language. Because of this, I do not intend to go over ground that has already been extensively covered.

Rather, the question that interests me is: What is the degree of cultural influence on English as it is used in Nigeria? What thirst are Nigerians trying to quench when they incorporate values and views – nay, their very culture – into a medium thrust on them by circumstance as the language of official transaction, of education, of the media, of the legislature and the judiciary, and even indeed of interethnic communication?

This paper seeks to answer these questions, and to explicate the disadvantages in Nigeria's continued use of a language that is alien to its peoples, no matter how much the attempt is made – consciously or unconsciously – to *Nigerianize* it.

English, the New Englishes, and Nigerian English

No language is static. All languages change in time and in space. The phrase *the English language* started to be used sometime in the so-called 'Middle English' period, when English was the language of England. On this point Strang (1977:156) noted that there was a 'time

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when Englishmen spoke English and English was the language of Englishmen. Numbers of speakers were small and although the population grew' it was 'not enough to alter the character of an essentially single and homogeneous community'. Nowadays, however, it is obvious that any such homogeneity in the English language (at least when spoken) belongs to the womb of history.

Indeed, there is not a single language that has spread over most parts of the world as English has done, through the migration of its speakers. As a result, it has become greatly diversified. As the English migrated to new settlements and colonies, there began to emerge such different Englishes as American English, Australian English, Canadian English, New Zealand English, and South African English.

In the continents to which these varieties belong there has been a similarity in the process of acquisition of the language, as a consequence of which these 'Englishes' are said to be Native Englishes with native speakers. In its new environments, the language has gone though processes of nativization, whereby it has acquired socio-cultural elements from the environments with which it has come into contact, bringing about the so-called 'New Englishes' that are easily identifiable and distinguishable from the traditional native varieties and entirely legitimate in their own right. In current literature, therefore, scholars discuss such Englishes as Indian English, Ghanaian English, and West African English.

It is within such a framework that we can discuss English and its transformation in Nigerian sociolinguistic and socio-cultural environments. The new usage that has emerged, as a result of interaction between English and a distinctively Nigerian environment, is 'the variety of world Englishes spoken and written by Nigerians within the Nigerian environment' (Eka 2003: 35).

The inevitability of nativization

Literatures in New Englishes demonstrate that 'deviations' from native-speaker norms and the creation of new norms, that strive to meet the socio-cultural dictates of the new environment, are responsible for the emergence of these Englishes. This is certainly the case with Nigerian English, which has broken the native-speaker norms to become nativized. As Peter notes (in 'Norms and meaning potentials,' 1998:389), 'in order for the non-native culture to make the new language a part of the culture, it must nativize it'.

As such, the term *nativization* refers to the process whereby a language that is not indigenous to a community adapts to (and in various degrees imbibes) the culture(s) and language(s) of a particular community while still retaining many of its original features, as used by its native speakers. In other words, the process of nativization involves integrating a language into the culture of a community or integrating the culture of the community into a language for the expression of the experience and worldview of *that* community in particular.

It is the quest for such an English, which still has 'communion with its ancestral home, but [is] altered to suit its new surrounding' (Achebe 1975:61) that has brought about the emergence of the 'new Englishes'. The variety now widely known as Nigerian English is different – and easily distinguishable – from both the native variety and all other varieties. This results from the fact that language and culture are closely intertwined and, since the languages and cultures of Nigerians are different from others in the world, it is hardly out of place that Nigerians have created their own variety of the language to express their values, their worldview, and their distincive orientation and experience.

In the process the influence of indigenous Nigerian languages and cultures on English has been profound, in that very many innovations in language form and use have emerged. These 'innovations' (sometimes referred to as 'deviations') will be identified and described here in terms only of their lexico-semantic and pragmatic innovations/deviations. We have chosen to examine these levels because originality, creativity and innovation are more productive and noticeable at the lexico-semantic and pragmatic levels and are more susceptible to cultural influence than others. The lexical items that we will use as illustrations here are part of the lexico-semantic and pragmatic usage of a substantial group of Nigerians across a broad social spectrum.

Cultural influence at the lexico-semantic level: loanwords, coinages, and shifts

The use of certain lexical items with meanings that are understood only in the Nigerian context

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and by Nigerians has been identified as characterizing Nigerian English, and generally, nativization is manifested in the following forms at this level. Here we shall consider three groupings: loanwords, coinages, and semantic shifts

Loanwords

The wholesale transfer (or borrowing) of lexical items from Nigerian languages into English notably includes the following:

agbada a kind of flowing dress for men, especially among the Yoruba: 'Chief Ogini wore agbada to the wedding ceremony.'
babanriga a kind of long, loose dress for men, especially among the Hausas: 'I really like your babanriga.'
akara an item of food, also referred to as 'bean cake'
akamu pap: 'This morning I ate *akara* and *akamu*.'
akpu, *banga, eba, egusi, ogbono*, *tuwo* 'soup' (in various Nigerian languages), as in: 'Anytime I eat *eba* I have stomach upset'; 'Can I eat some *tuwo* rice?'; 'I don't like the smell of *akpu*'; 'I will like to eat *ogbono* soup mixed with *egusi*.'
danfo, okada a mode of transportation: 'You either go by *danfo* or you take an *okada*.'
adakaji, oba chieftaincy titles, as in: 'The *Adakaji* II was at the coronation of the *oba* of Lagos.'

Such instances indicate clearly that items have been borrowed into the language because they cannot be accurately translated into English. However, once borrowed into English in Nigeria they become part of the vocabulary of English in the same way as such now widely used former borrowings as *agenda* from Latin, *cosmos* from Greek, and *rendezvous* from French. These particular words have been universalized, but communities of users of English everywhere have their distinctive vocabularies. The range in Nigeria is entirely pragmatic and particularly rich.

Without such words, cultural expression and identity as regards food and mode of dressing, transport, customs and so on would not have been possible. They bridge a gap that English could not easily handle without such a straightforward process of absorption, a process which has enlarged and enriched the vocabulary of English for centuries, whether or not such terms are (eventually) internationalized, as with *agenda* from Latin, *chaos* from Greek, and *kangaroo* from an Aboriginal Australian language. All such borrowed words serve to fill the inevitable gaps in all languages. As a result, in this instance, where English was originally unable to handle distinctively Nigerian and other West African phenomena and concepts, it becomes capable of doing so and in the process itself becomes a language of West Africa.

Coinages

Lexical items are borrowed into or coined in local English to suit the Nigerian environment, to such an extent that, when they are used, they immediately mark a statement or a piece of writing as characteristic of Nigerian English. Often, however, local words are not adopted but the forms and meanings of everyday English words are extended, and perhaps adapted, to cover particular local phenomena and situations. Some examples:

backyard used much as elsewhere (as in 'The firewood is in the backyard'), but also a vulgarism for 'buttocks' (as in 'Look at that lady's backyard!')
been-to a person who has returned to Nigeria after a long stay overseas: 'The way he speaks, everybody knows that he is a *been-to*.'
chewing-stick a piece of wood which can be softened by chewing and moistening and which serves the purpose of teeth-cleaning: 'Give me a *chewing stick*. I need to clean my teeth.'
cover-cloth a long piece of cloth usually wrapped around the body when one lies down to sleep: 'The boy is sleeping. Where is his *cover-cloth*?'
Ghana-must-go a bribe, as in: '*Ghana-must-go* bags exchanged hands.'
half-current voltage from electricity that is not fully generated: 'NEPA [the electricity company] brought *half-current*.'
overload an excess number of passengers or goods carried by a vehicle: 'The lorry has bad tyres, yet it is carrying *overload*.'
scale through move easily through the solving of a problem: 'At last, I have *scaled through* the hurdles of exams.'

Semantic shifts or extensions

In Nigerian English, some lexical items have had their standard international meanings shifted, restricted, or extended, as with:

trek walk a short distance: 'Are you going to *trek* to your house?'

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machine a motor cycle: 'I will climb *machine* to the junction. I cannot trek.'
station the place where one works: 'I will go back to my *station* on Monday morning.'
settle offer gratification of one form or another in order to win favour; bribe: 'I have *settled* all the members of the House of Representatives.'
long legs corruption involving nepotism: 'Your father should use his *long legs* to get you a job.'
big/senior boys men who are rich and influential: 'That hotel is for *big boys* only.'
four-one-nine ('419') a fraudster or cheat: 'Jerry is a *four-one-nine*. He has duped me!'

In addition to these examples there is the extension of existing meaning and use to cover new areas of experience. This is particularly observable with reference to kinship terms, which reflect the structure of the Nigerian family and society. The words *father, mother/mummy*, *sister, brother,* and *uncle* are being extended to cover someone with no biological relationship to the person concerned. The term *brother* may have an extended meaning that includes a man of the same tribe or denomination, and *uncle* may be used to refer not only to one's mother or father's brother (or even one's sister's husband), but also to any man much older than a younger person or a man whose name is not known.

Cultural influence at the pragmatic level

Some distinctive usages characterize Nigerian English at this complex level, where English often serves as a bridge among communities with different languages. As a result, Nigerians have for example developed all forms of greeting norms using English, in line with a style of greeting that is prevalent in their cultures. For example, such a greeting as *Well done sir* may be said to someone who is not apparently doing anything but just passing by, and *goodnight* can be said in place of goodbye, while *Goodnight ma*, for example, might be used to greet someone even when it is not night – to indicate that you do not intend to see the person again until the next day.

Indeed, Nigerians are so eager to express their cultures in the 'alien' language that greeting norms such as *well seated* have found their way into local English usage. Especially among the Yoruba culture there is greeting for virtually everything done on the surface of the earth. Thus, the phrase *well seated* is used to greet someone who is sitting down: it is a translation from Yoruba *E ku ijoko*, traditionally used to greet someone who is sitting.

Another area where culturally determined usage is observable is the use of *sorry* on every occasion that requires sympathy. When a Nigerian says *sorry,* it does not mean that s/he is responsible for anything that may have happened and is therefore apologising. Rather, it could be another way of saying *what a pity* or *what a shame.* However, using these phrases to show sympathy would be out of place in Nigeria, because this is not culturally or socially acceptable. *Sorry* therefore substitutes for them.

Another area of cultural influence on Nigerian English usage is the importance of politeness. Politeness phenomena in the indigenous languages have been transferred into English in such a way that the names of the people addressed are hardly mentioned at all, especially if they are older than the person addressing them. Thus, one often hears modes of address like *chief, Prof, Doctor, Sir,* and *Pastor*, as the example in 'Good morning, *chief*.' Indeed, in recent years Nigerians have been adding *sir* to the chosen title in order to show extreme respect or politeness, as in '*Prof sir,* can I take the book?'

It is considered rude or impolite to address people in positions of authority, or people who are older than onseself, by their actual names. For example, a form of greeting such as 'Good morning, Professor Olokun' by a younger person or someone of lower rank or status is culturally and socially unacceptable. Recently, however, the use of such words as *daddy, mummy, uncle,* and *auntie* as politeness phenomena has emerged in the use of English in Nigeria. These terms are not necessarily used for kinsfolk but to show respect for age and position, and some level of intimacy. As a result, younger persons refer to older ones as, for example, *mummy, daddy, uncle,* and *auntie*.

The nativization of English: Is it filling a vacuum in Nigeria?

It is clear that the features we have discussed in this paper have become indexical markers of English in Nigeria. But obvious as it may be that English has become a Nigerian language,

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by virtue of being nativized – and infusing into it as many local cultural elements as possible (particularly in the lexical, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions); it is still not *indigenous* to Nigeria.

Unarguably, language is an integral part of culture. It helps in exploring, discovering, extending, and recording experiences in the culture of a people (cf. Akindele & Adegbite, 1999:6). Language incorporates everything about such a culture, in that it represents the concepts, thoughts, actions, and activities of a people. Many years ago the German diplomat and scholar Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767–1835) put the matter as follows:

> The spiritual trait and structure of the language of the people are so intimately blended that given either of the two, one should be able to derive the other from it to the fullest extent.… Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of the people: their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical.
>
> (cited in Salzmann 1998:39).

Language is a sign of social, cultural, national and self identity. It is a symbol of power and ideology without which an individual or a nation is disabled. The questions that Nigerians therefore need to ask themselves are:

- Can the English language achieve purposes such as have been discussed above in the life of an individual, a group of people or the nation when it is not indigenous?
- No matter how much English becomes nativized or domesticated, can it quench the thirst of Nigerians in wanting to give outward expression to their spirit?
- To what extent can it serve as an index of the culture of the people?
- To what extent can it be said to be a symbol of power, and of social and cultural identity?

Language constitutes a representation of the whole world that we sense and experience. We cannot communicate what we cannot first represent, because we would have no symbols with which to communicate it. And what we can represent must first be captured from our cultural worldview. In other words, what we represent must be indexical of our world, our experiences, and our culture; otherwise our communicative tendencies and capabilities will be distorted. Is this not the trauma that Nigerians have been subjected to when for many years, before and after independence, they have been forced to communicate in a language that represents a culture that is alien to them, at the expense of their indigenous languages?

Conclusion – and a proposal

My contention in this paper is that Nigerians have striven so diligently to nativize English, not only because it has come into contact with the indigenous languages, but more importantly because they are eager to bring themselves out of the linguistic polythene bag in which for decades they have been sealed. It is a quest for an avenue to give an outward manifestation of their spirit and to express their social, cultural and national identity.

Since the English language is the medium of expression in all the domains of national life, they have no choice but to invest the language, as much as possible, with a cultural power that can serve their communicative needs. This represents a yearning for cultural expression as well as a quest for social and national and self-identity. It is an attempt to fill a vacuum.

The aim of this paper must be seen in its proper perspective. It is not to outrightly condemn the use of English in Nigeria. It should without a doubt be taught in schools. Rather, it is to assert that, although Nigerians have thoroughly nativized the language, it should not becloud our sense of reasoning to think that we no longer need a national language. It is important to use (Nigerian) English, but it is more important to have an explicitly stated national language that is *truly national*.

This paper hopes to reawaken scholars at large and Nigerians in general to the need and importance of having an indigenous language as a token of our culture, identity, power, national pride, and self-reliance. This is necessary because, since the era of Bamgbose, Jowitt, and others, not much has been said about the national language question. Indeed, it seems that sociolinguists in particular and Nigerians in general have gone into a deep sleep as far as this issue is concerned.

Our preoccupation in the last decades has been on Nigerian English, its characteristics, and its standardization and codification. Inasmuch as these are also important, we must bear in mind that, for Nigeria to recapture lost

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honour and self-esteem, the words of Noam Webster in the United States – that 'as an independent nation, our honour requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as in government' (quoted in Bram 1955:56) should caution us and make us reluctant to solve our linguistic problems by continuing to use English in all spheres of Nigerian life.

When a people are alienated from their language(s), as is the case in Nigeria today, they gradually become alienated from their culture because there is a limit to which they can express it in a 'foreign' language. When this happens, it means that the very being, spirit and identity of the people have been eroded. Such a people seem to lack direction and focus, often becoming victims of crime, poverty, chaos, lawlessness, and consequently unwarranted underdevelopment. Therefore, Nigerians needs a language, not 'made in England by the British', and not that which 'remains (their) distinctive property, however widely it is learnt or used (or nativized)' as the British Conservative politician Enoch Powell put it, but a language made in Nigeria by Nigerians, with which they can express their cultures uninhibited.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to give a brief background of English, New Englishes and Nigerian English. I have examined some cultural influence on English in the Nigerian environment at the lexico-semantic and pragmatic levels, indicating that Nigerians invest the English language with such cultural elements as are reflected in coinages, borrowings from indigenous languages, extensions of meaning, the use of politeness phenomena and so on because there is a vacuum that needs be filled – a vacuum created by the lack of opportunity to use and express themselves anywhere in their indigenous language(s). For this reason, they make do with the language that government and circumstances have thrust upon them by attempting to express their being in an alien tongue.

No matter how much English has been nativized, so as to look like a Nigerian language, there is still the need for an explicitly and consciously defined and constitutionalized national language. This language will, to a great extent, enable Nigerians to properly and conveniently express their experiences and worldview. It will bring about linguistic freedom, as well as cultural rejuvenation. ■

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