

THE SUPRA-SEGMENTALS IN THE SPOKEN ENGLISH OF NIGERIANS

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ABSTRACT

In this study some 250 undergraduate students of various academic disciplines and linguistic backgrounds in Delta State University, Abraka are tested on a passage to determine their mastery of stress and some five sentence types of English in the area of supra-segmentals. An evaluation of their performance shows a complete lack of knowledge of the workings of the supra-segmentals. The result indicates Banjo's (1979) indictment 30 years ago (1979) that "the appropriate use of English stress and intonation is the final hurdle which the vast majority of speakers of English as a second language never manage (sic) to cross... ". The study goes further to suggest ways to eradicate this anomaly among L2 users of English in Nigeria after some related literature review of the problem.

Keywords: Supra segmentals, spoken english, Nigerians L1 L2, language

INTRODUCTION

The English language is (until probably very recently) learned by Nigerians after the mother-tongue has been acquired. As an L2 (English as a second language) it is usually formally learned in schools. English as a language of cohesion in a multilingual Nigeria must be learned by an individual to have communicative access to other Nigerians outside his linguistic group. In addition, a mastery and command of the language has its instrumental benefits. As a second language often learned after the native language has been acquired, and as a language learned outside its natural setting, the English language presents many linguistic problems to those so inclined. One problem area of English on which scholars and linguists often focus attention is that of phonology.

A common word that is heard about learning English by Nigerians is the word interference. In this regard the sound system of English is often highlighted in contrast with those of the local languages, and generally, the absence in some cases, of equivalence between the local languages and English in the pattern of sounds, leads to interference on the part of Nigerian learners of English. For example the inter-dental fricatives and the voiced palato-alveolar fricative present problems to most Nigerian learners of English because (as often explained) of the general or widespread absence of these sounds in the local languages.

It is perhaps true that if phonology is split into segmental phonetics and prosody, the area of segmental phonetics has received more attention and comments than that of prosody. The reason is that most comments on English learning and interference will begin from the level of the individual sound and most academic programmes on phonology begin the same way and only enter the area of stress and

prosody after the area of segmental phonetics has been touched upon. In most cases by the time the second aspect (prosody) comes for discussion either interest on the part of listeners has waned or the feeling of having had enough has set in. This could be one of the explanations for the perceived difficulty *L2* learners have with the stress and intonation of English as articulated by Banjo and other scholars. The English sounds, like those of other languages, only have meaning and relevance when combined with other sounds of the language. They do not stand by themselves alone and remain meaningful. They require the combination of other sounds of the language to make meaning. Combined with these other sounds therefore, they influence and receive influences from them to make them phonetically different from their realization in isolation. The phonetics of the sound in isolation must be necessarily different from that of the sound in a stream of speech or connected speech.

INTONATION: MEANING 'BEARING POTENTIALS

The English language as an international language is very resourceful in using pitch and rhythm to generate new meanings from otherwise ordinary utterances. Just as tonal languages use tones to make lexical distinctions so does English by means of intonation crystallizes a welter of meanings (either grammatical or attitudinal) from one bit of utterance. As Wilkins (1991) rightly points out "the correct interpretation of any spoken utterance would be quite impossible without taking intonation into account". On its rhythm, Gimson (1980) draws our attention to its being "stress timed with the related obscuration of weak syllabus (as) the prime distinguishing feature of the language's pronunciation".

The truth is that much of the wealth of the language in terms of meaning formation is embedded in the intonation system. Perhaps this is the reason why Wilkins (1991) says that "the imposition of incorrect rhythm patterns on a language can interfere more with effective communication than can the faulty production of an individual sound". It is thus clear that the phonetics of English at the supra-segmental level is not less important than that of the sound in isolation.

NIGERIANS AND THE SUPRA-SEGMENTALS

The question is; do Nigerians as *L2* users of English display as much mastery of the supra-segmental level as that of the sound in isolation. Comments over the years since Banjo (1979) do not seem to differ significantly. Amayo (1982) in his, "The classification of Nigerian spoken English" sounds even bleaker than Banjo (1979). According to Amayo among v3 "... the degree of phonological competence does not correspond to that of syntactico -semantics". It is implied that Nigerians' mastery of English is higher in the sphere of syntactico-semantics than in phonology. In his Popular Nigeria English, Jowitt (1991) distances the Nigerian Variety from the RP. According to him at word-level the difference between the supra-segmental phonology of PNE and that of SBE (RP) is most salient in the area of primary accent placement. According to him "what stands out in PNE is the preference for

final syllable primary accent, a preference particularly notable in the case of verbs and of complex noun phrases or large units".

Scholars generally have not been impressed with the handling of the English prosody by Nigerians as L2 users of English. It was in this spirit that Egbe (1979) like earlier critics asserted that "the conversion of English in Nigeria into a syllable-timed language is a singular contribution by Nigerians to its evolution in modern times". In place of native English man's shortened forms, intonation patterns and employment of modal auxiliaries, Nigerians as L2 users resort to "adjuncts". (Please, kindly) and honorifics such as Doc. Prof. Sir, Rev. and so on to convey politeness. In this connection Afolayan (1976) defends Nigerians as being inherently polite and that "any apparent rudeness shown in their English usage is not in their person but rather in their inadequate mastery of the English language". The specific reference to the poor performance of Nigerians as L2 users of English in the supra-segmentals forms the basis of this study whose aim is to re-assess the performance again especially in the light of the boost which oral communication in English has enjoyed from the ever growing communication technology.

METHODOLOGY

In the study some 250 undergraduate students of the Delta State University were made to read a passage where certain words were tested for stress and some five sentence types of English were also tested. The students who constituted the guinea-pigs of this study were randomly gathered across the various academic disciplines and irrespective of sex and age. Perhaps the only feature which casts homogeneity on them is their level of education as they are all undergraduates of the University. They can therefore be said to have been randomly assembled from the undergraduate pool. Delta state is a miniature Nigeria in terms of the plurality of ethnic groups and the University is even more so because of the admissions policy which welcomes many students from other parts of Nigeria. The sample in question, by its randomness is linguistically very heterogeneous, and it greatly mirrors the pluralistic nature of the country in terms of ethnicity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Passage: When he got there, Paul realized that many of his friends were also present at the political rally. He could immediately see Anthony, Philip, Atkins and a few others. Seeing Paul, Anthony quickly acknowledged his presence by waving to him. "Did you visit Rosemary last Friday as planned?" he threw in a question anxiously. "I did, but she was not at home." Paul retorted calmly. "Political rallies these days have lost their charm" says Anthony in disappointment. "The -isms and -ities that were the hallmark of campaigns in the 60's have vanished. Then your ears would almost explode from a ceaseless concatenation of inexhaustible vocabulary such as tribalism, nepotism and political vendetta freely issuing from the breath of practised political orators." "Did you say political debtors?" "No", said Anthony, 'I said orators, but not debtors.'

Words tested on stress

'Anthony, 'Rosemary, vocabulary, 'tribalism and 'nepotism

Sentences tested on Tunes

- 1) when he got there, Paul realized that many of his friends were also present at the political rally. *Tune II followed by Tune I*
- 2) He could immediately see Anthony, Philip, Atkins and a few others. *Enumeration using either fall, fall, fall or rise, rise, fall.*
- 3) "Did you visit Rosemary last Friday as planned?" he threw a question anxiously. *A rising tune followed by a rising tag.*
- 4) "I did, but she was not at home" Paul retorted calmly. *A falling tune followed by a falling tag*
- 5) "No" said Anthony, 'I said orators but not debtors'
Contrastive stress on orators and debtors

Table 1: Performance by the 250 students

Word	Right stressing	Wrong stressing
Anthony	14(5.6%)	236(94.4%)
Rosemary	16(6.4%)	234(93.6%)
Vocabulary	8(3.2%)	242(96.8%)
Tribalism	11(4.4%)	239(95.6%)
Nepotism	10(4%)	242(96%)

Source: Survery 2008

This gives a very poor mean performance of 11.8. The resulting standard deviation of 2.86 is a clear testimony to the invariability of the poor handling of the supra-segmentals among Nigerians as L2 users of English.

Table 2: Analysis of performance on tune

Sentence	Right tune	Wrong tune
1	175(70%)	75(30%)
2	195(78%)	55(22%)
3	0(0%)	250(100%)
4	171(68%)	79(32%)
5	45(18%)	205(82%)

The statistics on performance is indeed very poor and it very well corroborates the assertion of Banjo in 1979. One big question is: has there been any improvement since then in the area of supra-segmentals? This will be examined shortly.

In the area of stress the word vocabulary records the lowest in terms of performance that is, it is the word most wrongly stressed and therefore badly pronounced with none of the syllables receiving any special stress (in which case all the syllables receive equal stress, a kind of rehash of the syllable timed rhythm of the local languages). When stressed, the word receives stress on the wrong syllable.

One often heard vocaBULary instead of voCABulary. This is in spite of the fact that the word is a very common word especially in the 60's when people were specially admired for their gift in this area of language usage. Following this are nepotism and tribalism which too like vocabulary are popular words in the politics of the 60's. The word Anthony attracts the stress on the wrong syllable -THO- because of the fact that that syllable, unlike in standard British English, is given full realization. While Rosemary was not only given stress on the wrong syllable, it was often given tone on each of the syllables. Thus one heard Rose'mary

Sentences: When he got there... was often wrongly given Tune I instead of Tune II as is usual in R.P. A total of 75 of the 250 subjects committed this error. This represents 30% of the total population used in the exercise. Sentence 2, which presents nominal items for enumeration, would call for consistency in any of the tunes employed. One expected either a rising tune on each item except the last one, or a falling tune for all the items. However in many cases there was a mixture of the two tunes. Sentence 3 represents a rising tune habitually followed by a rising tag in Received Pronunciation (RP) English. The aspect of the rising tag was apparently unknown to the guinea pigs and all uttered the tag with a falling tune. This recorded zero on the scoreboard. Sentence 4, which is a case of a falling tune followed by a falling tag, recorded a higher performance on the part of the subjects. Sentence 5 represents in BBC usage contrastive stress on orators and debtors. However the right performance among the sample under investigation is only 18%.

The statistics exhibited as the result of the performance of his sampled population truly underscores the view of Banjo (1979) already quoted. One might as well add that Nigerians as *L2* users of English do not appear to elevate their mastery of the spoken English above the segmental level. The areas of stress and rhythm look ignored by efforts at mastering the language. The overall percentage (positive) performance in the combined areas of stress and pitch is 25.8. This is a far cry from what is expected in a country where English has functioned as a lingua franca and official language for many years.

Important as stress and pitch are to the English language in terms of the expression of meaning, one finds that Nigerians, as *L2* users of English, are yet to come to terms with these aspects of English. Amayo (1982) rightly asserted that among Nigerians "English stress patterns are converted into tone patterns such as underlie *LI*" This phenomenon is characteristic according to him of VC (phon)2 speakers. Since the speakers of V (Phon) 3&4 are respectively 'few' and 'scanty in number' according to him, one must say that majority of Nigerian users of English fall within the v (phon) 2 variety. "Supra-segmentally, this variety is a tone language" he concludes Since the testees in this study are university undergraduates with little hope of improved performance even after graduation, one says that most Nigerian users of English fall within or below this variety. To that extent English is still very much a tone language in Nigeria. In fact, it is discovered in the study that the word Rosemary was often echoed Rosemary instead of 'Rosemary as it is in RP. In the daily performance of Nigerians such words as vocabulary and hippopotamus are

rendered with all the syllables fully realized. A pronunciation marked with syllable counting syndrome.

All the syllables are given equal prominence so that none of them is marked out as stressed. They are pronounced like such local names as Ogbomosho and Ogbemudia where all the syllables have equal prominence. Different linguistic groups behave uniquely differently in this aspect of English language usage, however in such words as vocabulary and hippopotamus one generally hears the stress transferred to the wrong syllable thus:

VocaB UlarY and
hippopoTAmus.

Many of such eccentricities are listed in Kujore (1985). The tonic stress is equally problematic among Nigerians as L2 users of English. The sentence: *Mary went to school yesterday* is yet to be recognized by many Nigerian users of English as answering at least four questions as follows:

- a. Who went to school yesterday?
- b. What did Mary do yesterday?
- c. Where did Mary go to yesterday?
- d. When did Mary go to school?

To rightly answer any of these four questions in the sentence, majority of Nigerians are still to appreciate appropriately transferring the tonic stress from one word to the other in the sentence. Many would give the nuclear stress to school despite the meaning they want to convey. Perhaps this point is better elaborated with a live example from Jowitt (1991). He says WASC candidates at a certain school are due to take several papers but most of them are unable to answer any questions. Hence in the Mathematics examination a mass walk-out takes place. A senior civil servant relating the story says:

PNE: The walkout first took place in the Mathematics Paper

SBE: The walkout first took place in the MatheMAtics paper (92).

While the typical Nigerian's performance is as above (PNE), Jowitt explains that Mathematics requires nuclear stress so as to indicate that it was in this paper and not in any other that the mass walk-out took place. The role of the supra-segmentals in enriching utterances with attitudinal, grammatical, accentual and discoursal meanings does not seem to be part of the repertoire of Nigerians as L2 users of English.

It does not seem to make any difference in meaning to many Nigerian users whether the expression 'come in' said to a loved friend is said with a rise or a fall. Neither is the expression:

'Pass the salt, please' said to an elder give any special tune to indicate politeness on the part of the speaker. In most cases one hears the expression and similar others said regardless of pitch or the appropriate pitch. Pitch as a meaning-carrying feature of English is not appreciated by a majority of Nigerian users of English. They consider meaning as beginning and ending with the words and nothing affective or accentual is associated with the pitch of an utterance. To that extent one says that quite a majority of the users of English in Nigeria derive only lexical

meaning from utterances. They do not appreciate pitch and the welter of meanings associated with it.

In place of pitch they resort, like Uzoeki stated, to 'adjuncts' (please, kindly) and on honorifics such as 'Doc', 'Prof', 'Sir', Rev and many others. "Nigerian English", according to Adetugbo, 'expresses politeness by distancing the speaker from the person spoken to through the speaker's use of titles and honorifics and also distancing pronouns' (160). Afolayan (1974) recognizes the same anomaly in the usage of English as L2 in Nigeria. To him the word PLEASE and a group of modals COULD, WOULD SHOULD and MIGHT in addition to the two phrases 'thank you' and 'grateful for' carry the full weight of attitudinal meanings intended by majority of Nigerian users of English.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One concludes this essay therefore that the perfection achieved by Nigerians at the level of segmental phonology of English has no counterpart in the area of supra-segmental phonology. The level of supra-segmental phonemics in its fine complexity looks an unattainable plateau (in Banjo's terms) which many L2 users of English can hardly toy within their progress towards ambilingualism. It may be true that in their progress from the patois of the beginner towards enviable communicative competence many stages or plateaux are attained and soon vacated for new arrivals. One conceptualizes that initial difficulties in articulating new sounds such as the inter-dental fricatives and the central vowels are soon overcome, or possibly because of the redundancy features of English the poor articulation of these sounds is neutralized.

This however, seems to work well only at the segmental level. At the level of stress and pitch however, there are no conceivable redundancy features apart from honorifics and distancing pronouns that compensate for the poor mastery (or non-mastery) and handling of the intonation system. These, no doubt, are some of the many reasons why L2 user's spoken English is less Standard English than his written English. This is why he is often wrongly accused of impoliteness in his use of the language. In a world already bestridden and reduced to a global village by an ever-waxing communication technology, advantage can be taken of the various communication gadgets from the western world to make the Standard English available to L2 users in all its freshness and flavours. By the same means the English language as used in all conceivable (informal and formal) situations in the LI environment can be made accessible to L2 users in Nigeria to emulate.

In fact, no effective language learning can be divorced from technology. In the words of Adegbija (2004) language teaching, learning and technology have become virtually inseparable. Technology, he maintains, has become the backbone and lifeblood of contemporary language teaching methodologies. Several technological strategies, facilities and devices such as audio-conferencing in distance learning courses, networked collaborative interaction, computer assisted prosody training among others have become commonplace in language teaching in

most parts of the world. Nigeria cannot afford to remain isolated in this respect if we are to promote international intelligibility in English. One does not by this suggest a mastery that makes an *L2* user in Nigeria indistinguishable from his British counterpart. This is not itself feasible considering the fact that the *L2* user has already internalized one language, which, with all its interference features, will always militate against the realization of such ambition. One seeks by this, a kind of approximation that makes the *L2* speaker's tongue a variety of English rather than another language altogether.

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