



Semantic Change as Variety Markers in Nigerian English Communications and Interactions

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ABSTRACT

It is imperative to state that whatever change or changes occur in various aspects of human life owes it to the realization of language. The English language is one of the most influential means of communication in most countries of the world. Nigerian English is not exempted in this regard. As a result, it has undergone various changes based on different social and cultural influences. Language cannot be studied in isolation from society, since men make up the society and the importance of language to man has remained unchallenged by any scientific research. It is observed that the English language has undergone a lot of changes in the socio-cultural environment of the country where it is adopted other than its native environment. This paper examines the semantic change in Nigerian English which features emanate from the means of acquisition by Nigerians. Uriel Weinreich's linguistic theory is used to explicate the phenomenon of language variation. Nigerian English has been cultivated, acculturated, indigenized to suit the socio-cultural world view of the people. It has also added local colour and distinguishes itself from the native speaker variety with features reflected at the semantic levels.

Keywords: *Semantic change, Nigerian English, Variety markers, social context*

Introduction

Nigerian English is a variety of world Englishes. The English language acquired the status of a second language in Nigeria after about a century of Britain's socio-political domination in Nigeria's geographical territory. English was used as the official language all through the period of colonial administration. Since Nigeria is a multi-lingual society, the use of English becomes imperative for the people and the colonizers to communicate effectively in a linguistically diverse society like Nigeria. Since its emergency in Nigeria as a result of colonial infiltration, it has undergone a lot of modifications, duplicity, alterations, and changes at all levels of linguistics components; lexical, syntactic, phonological, and semantic levels.

According to any mention of English as a Second Language in Nigeria is however not complete without a mention of the multi-ethnic structure of the country. This factor provides a healthy environment for the English language to thrive. A body of language will emerge which will be internationally intelligible and seen as a distinct Nigerian variety. (Omoniyi, 2009. P.100)

According to Bamgbose (1971: 35) Of the entire heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language. The fact that Nigerians depend on the English language in many communicative domains cannot be overstated. From the colonial era till now, the English language has enjoyed a high profile in terms of its functionality in Anglophone Africa and most specifically Nigeria. The importance of English includes its role as inter-ethnic lingua-Franca; an official language used in educational institutions, political and government institutions, the language of press or mass media, formal business and the judiciary, the language of diplomacy, employment, and economy. The English language is used to promote national integration and nation-building. It is the language used for general literacy or documentation in respect to speaking, writing, and other psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic roles it performs.

With the numerous functions the English language performs in the social domain of Nigerian society, it can be said that since its introduction by the colonizers, it has undergone socio-cultural interference, alterations, changes, and modifications having the status of a second language in Nigeria. There are phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic shifts from Standard British English. Although the changes might not be total, its usage and construction show that it is distinct from a Nigerian English variety. These obvious changes occur as a result of first language otherwise known as mother tongue interference. According to (Asworth 1992: p.121): The mother tongue or native language is the language which a person acquires in the early years and which normally becomes his or her natural instrument of thought and communication while the second language is the language acquired by a person in addition to her mother tongue.

The American Heritage Dictionary of English language (Skiba 2000) defines mother tongue as a native language, the language learned by children that are passed from one generation to the next. It is received by birth or passed down. The mother tongue is not necessarily the language of birth of a person; it could be a foreign language adopted with which one conducts daily linguistic activities. It is an obvious fact that quite a several young Nigerians born and bred in Nigeria speak only English, they can therefore lay claim to the English language as their mother tongue, according to this definition: "Mother tongue can be defined as the language in which bi- or multilingual person conducts his everyday activities and which he/she has the greatest linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge" (Akindele & Adebite 1992: p.39-40)

The influence of the mother tongue is so overwhelming that it is very difficult to detach its cultural tone and elements in the second language which is the English language. The English language that the colonizers forced on the native speakers is no longer the exact English used by Nigerians. Although there are certain common grounds, the Nigerian variety of English has different linguistics features.

As pointed out by Achebe (1975): "...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of many African experiences, it will have to be a new English, still full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new surrounding".

We can therefore say, since the adoption of English as a second language in Nigeria, has undergone "Nativization" (Odumah, 1993), "localization" (Kachru, 1983), and "domestication" (Achebe 1975). These appellatives are central to explaining the fact that the English language has come to stay with us in all our human interactions and we are in the process of establishing and expanding the language in the non-native environment. Thus in Achebe's point of view, we should bend the language to accommodate our thought patterns and cultural values.

This paper focuses on the semantic level of linguistic composition. Interestingly, semantics as related to linguistic has been tied to the study of change in meaning over time. Here is the semantic deviation from first language transfer to the second language. Since semantic has been the most susceptible linguistic composition creatively used by Nigerian speakers of the English language. With the influence of local languages and the socio-cultural environment of Nigerian society, a change in meaning is inevitable.

Nigerian English came into existence as a result of language contact which produces different linguistic variations. Uriel Weinreich's theory is applicable in this sense. He is the proponent of modern-day contact linguistics presented in a system framework for the categorization of mutual influence and mixing that occur when language is in contact (Weinreich, 1968).

Since Nigerian English is a variety of world Englishes, it has its distinct features due to its historical, geographical political, and socio-cultural factors.

The Varieties of Nigerian English: Geographical, Educational and Social

The global development of English has resulted in all kinds of varieties. Such varieties may be assessed from the viewpoints of the mode of acquisition and functions of the language as well as from the impact of local culture on the domesticated varieties of the language. The variety of English used in Nigeria can be viewed from the geographical, educational, social, and stylistic variation. The English we hear speak, read, write and use every day has core features that identify it as such; each particular usage exhibits peculiar geographical, social, or stylistic variations.

Ayo Banjo (1979) pointed out that: There are theoretically as many geographical varieties of the English language in Nigeria which is estimated at over two hundred indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria; this will imply that well over two hundred varieties of the English language which is enough to mark them out as significantly different variants of large geographical varieties or accents. As opined by Dustan (1969) the geographical varieties do exist in Nigerian English at all levels of linguistic composition but most especially at the phonological and semantic levels. It is easy to tell what part of a country a person is from by the accent when he speaks English; the usage commonly borders on gross mispronunciation, substitutions of familiar sounds for those of English sounds that are available in the mother tongue, especially vowels. The more educated the user, the fewer the traces of regional accents found in the communication of such a category of people. Educational varieties refer to the variations in a speech that result from the level of formal education acquired by the speaker. The more educated users speak a variety that is closer to the acceptable standard than the poorly educated ones, who most of the time use a sub-standard variety. These educational varieties also vary in the degree of intelligibility and acceptability.

Conversely, it is interesting to note that there is no correspondence between social status and language use, an upper social status does not necessarily imply a correspondingly high standard of education or exposure to the language. Many well-to-do Nigerians who do not possess a corresponding standard of western education or exposure to English are lowly placed on the social ladder as a result of what is termed “linguistic inadequacies”. Therefore, even when it is claimed that social varieties of Nigerian English do exist, characterizing them may prove a difficult task, and there is certainly no complete polarization of such varieties among the identifiable social classes (Okoro, 2016).

Uriel Weinreich Theory of Language Contact

Uriel Weinreich (1926- 1967) was a Polish-American linguist who profoundly influenced many fields of linguistics. Uriel's inventive work has influenced several generations of scholars in the field of semantics. The term language contact(LP) was postulated by Uriel Weinreich in the 1950s in New York, his

work focused on the context of immigrant languages and dialects in interaction with each other and with English.

Weinreich argued that any proper study of language contact had to take into account not only linguistically internal facts but also descriptions of the communities in which two or more languages were spoken. Language contact is a major factor in language change, contact with other languages and other dialectal varieties of one language is a source of alternative pronunciation, grammatical structure, vocabulary, and semantics. Prolonged language contact generally leads to bilingualism or multilingualism, to Weinreich, language contact often occurs along borders or as a result of migration. The transfer of words or phrases can be unidirectional or bi-directional.

Manifestations of language contact are found in a great variety of domains, i.e. language acquisition, language processing and production, conversation and discourse, social functions of language and language policy, typology and language change, and more.

Aspects of Semantic change as variety markers in Nigerian English

The concept of meaning in the study of language is a complex one most especially when cultural features are added. It is difficult or almost impossible to completely separate culture from language because language and culture complement each other. Adetuyi & Adeniran (2017, P.2: Weinreich, U.,1968) opined that in the theory of language contact When two languages are involved or are in contact, there is a high tendency that there will be a reflection of the first language in the second language. The cultural features in the mother tongue will be found in the second language. These are mostly found in Nigerian English at all levels of linguistic components. Semantics is one of the components of language. There are semantic markers that indicate the changes that occur in the cause of transferring the ideas or expressions in the mother tongue to the second language.

The concept of semantic markers

Semantic markers in the study of language have to do with important cohesive devices that connect ideas in the language concerning meaning. They are described as linguistic items which fulfill non-propositional, meta discursive (primary connective functions) and whose scope is inherently variable such that it may comprise both sub-sentential and supra-sentential units. Semantically, markers are best seen as processing instructions intended to aid the hearer in integrating the unit hosting the markers into a coherent mental representation of the unfolding discourse (Lamroy and Swiggers 1991: p.23). Items regarded as markers may originate in quite distributional classes, where they often have formally identical counterparts that are not used as markers. Semantic markers tend to be multifunctional. They have various divisions and

uses.

The markers that are found in Nigerian English are always in contrast with meaning:

Lexical and semantic configuration

Semantic extension in Nigerian linguistics context is the semantic boundaries of existing English words to confer unfamiliar meanings, According to Akindele and Adegbite (1992,p. 55) it is “the addition of meaning to the standard English word.” The word used in the NE context might be different but mean the same in the SBE context. Examples of semantic configuration in English usage found in Nigerian English variety are:

1. The politician gave the policeman kola nut (bribe) before she left for the statehouse.
2. I employed a watch night yesterday (watchman)
3. I hear (perceive) the smell (aroma) of the soup.
4. Mr. Obi hear (understands) language very well
5. Make sure you clean the house because strangers (visitors) are coming.
6. Yussuf is doing his freedom on Saturday (apprenticeship graduation)

Nigerian speakers of the English language are hamstring to express certain concepts drawn from the local language in English which are alien to SBE and which are the product of different coding systems whose meaning capabilities differ from those of English (Dazie 1985 pg. 11). The problem here is that, for the majority of speakers in NE, conceptualization tends to take place in their languages only to be translated, or for equivalents to be found for them in English.

From the above expressions and the underlined words “hear” “smell” “hears” and “strangers”. We can see that there is a different transfer of meaning in the local language to English “kola nut” in its literal sense is a seed that can be “chewed” but used in a figurative sense in the local language but still means (bribe) in the overall sense of it; “watch night” which is a devotional service lasting until after midnight especially on new year’s eve is configure to mean a “security” personnel (watchman) that keeps watching at night, “hear” which means the ability to listen is configured to mean sense of perception of a soup aroma; “hears” in sentence four means the ability to listen by the expression is configured to mean (understanding); “stranger” which refers to an unknown person is configured to mean “visitor.”

Semantic Shift in Nigerian English

The semantic shift can be described as an alteration or misconception of meaning. In the NE context what is intended in the same expression might not be the same in the SBE context. If a different intention for a word is shared by the speech community and become established in usage then a semantic

change/ shift has occurred.

A common example of the semantic shift is the appropriation of the meaning of English words for Nigerian purposes and uses. This can cause the original meaning to be shifted, restricted, or extended. Example:

1. I am trekking to the party.

The international meaning of ‘trekking’ has a connotation of a long-distance or difficult journey, the Nigerian use is to “walk a short distance”.

A particular expensive example of semantics in NE is the use of a variety of greetings. This stretching of meaning can not only change the meaning of the English phrase but also represent something from the culture. For example

2. Goodnight ma.

This can be said regardless of the time of the day and functions simply as an assumption that the person in question will not be seen until the next day. This has especially been noticed in Yoruba culture.

Semantic coinages and loan words in Nigerian English

Coinages function as a sort of colloquialism that is spoken in English but has a unique cultural meaning. These are also common in Nigerian English. Coinages typically have a short life span and are adopted for unique cultural purposes of the present, and as such, die out quickly after their acquisition. Examples are provided by Abdullahi- Idiagbon and Olaniyi (2011, p.78- 85):
Examples

- a. The man has a long- leg (meaning “well-connected”).
- b. Cross- carpeting is common in Nigeria politics (equivalent to crossing the floor in the United Kingdom)
- c. Mrs. Abiade used her bottom power to win contracts in the organization. (woman using her sexuality as a bargaining chip)
- d. Bola Ahmed Tinubu is a political juggernaut in Nigeria. (a formidable politician)
- e. The party was attended by Timbre and the calibre of the society (important or elites in the society).
- f. Bukola is my tight friend. (close friend)
- g. Lagos go slow is quite stressful (Traffic).
- h. Kindly bring my head-tie. (Headgear)

Loan words on the other hand are defined by the oxford dictionary as a word adopted from a foreign language. Nigerian English has a plethora of loan words that have no direct English equivalents but have noted themselves into the dialect and have a unique meaning. The examples below of prominent Nigerian English loan words are provided by Eburnola, G., (20

- a. Akara: an item of food, also refers to as bean cake

- b. Agbada: a kind of flowing dress worn by men, especially among Yoruba: e.g Chief Ogini wore agbada to the wedding ceremony.
- c. Danfo and Okada: a mode of transportation e.g You either go by danfo or you take okada.

Semantic Reduplication, Repetition or Tautology

Nadrajana (2007:p.88) defines reduplication as ‘ a word-formation process in which some part of a base word (segment, syllable, morpheme) is repeated either to the left or right of the word or occasionally within the middle of the word. While reduplication is found in a wide range of languages and language groups, its level of linguistic variation and production is high. It can also be used as repetition. Repetition is a term that is used to indicate emphasis or pluralism.

Every day, expressions among Nigerian users of English, contain tautology, saying the same thing more than once without making meaningful expressions. We have emphatic and pluralism reduplication. Below is the plural reduplication:

- a. He is standing at the end.
- b. Repeat what you said again. (repeat and again are the same)
- c. They deceived and hoodwinked. (deceived and hoodwinked are the same)
- d. Raise up your hand if you want to ask a question. (Raise and up are the same)
- e. The driver reversed back the car. (reverse and back are the same)
- f. I went for a night vigil yesterday. (night and vigil are the same)
- g. The lecturer is on sabbatical leave (the lecturer is on sabbatical or leave)

There are some Nigerian English words where repetitions are used to create pluralism. The English language tends to reduplicate or repeat a word to change it from singular to plural form. On several occasions, the quantifiers and the numerals are reduplicated to indicate or signify the plural form of the subject of discussion. We should know that the statements need not be reduplicated in any way, but reduplication has become part of the features of Nigerian English.

There are also emphatic expressions in reduplication in Nigerian languages which are also extended to English. Words are reduplicated and repeated for emphasis. Examples are as follow:

- a) Tell him to come now now.
- b) Please and please, I need your help.
- c) She bought a big, a very big house
- d) I will say the truth and nothing but the truth.

Proverbs and Idioms in Nigerian English

Generally, proverbs and idioms are symbolic expressions of people. In Nigeria,

proverbs are influenced by socio-cultural and the linguistic experience and orientations of different people that make up the country. Proverbs and idioms describe all human activities in the world. They point to humanity on the way forward or acceptable ways of living. Jegede (2011: p.35) identifies “Proverbs as a dynamic mode of discourse with unique identity...” He further posited that proverbs form a pool of linguistic and thematic resources from which speakers and writers in rhetoric, politics, economics, jurisprudence, philosophy, history and religion draw inspiration. Proverbs are employed in both oral and written communication in different aspects of life. There is profuse use of proverbs in social activities such as marriage ceremonies, burial rites, age-grade initiation, title-making, chieftaincy installation, dispute/conflict resolution among others in a contemporary-day in the communities. Wabara (1992: p.12) asserts that proverbs make a speech to be powerful and stirring, thus making the listener flow along with the speaker. Hence, proverbs are didactic, it provides ethical information, influence and change behaviour of man for the better.

Idiom on the other hand is culture-bound. Some are parallel to English idioms while some are not. Idioms are exclusive to a particular society. It is defined as “several words which when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meaning of each word” (Seidl & McMordie, 1988, p-12-13). It can be described as a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words (Hornby, 2010). Like idioms, proverbs often have a meaning that is greater than the meaning of the individual words put together, but differently from the idioms.

Some certain idioms and proverbs have predominantly Nigerian cultural elements. Examples:

- a. Bolaji is light-fingered (from Yoruba idioms “ O nfe wo” meaning prone to stealing).
- b. Adamu hit the nail on the head (from Yoruba idioms “ kan oju abe nko” meaning to say the exact truth).
- c. You better take the offer because half a loaf is better than none (from Delta “Buru lagha bo ka fulo” meaning it is better to take little thing rather than nothing)

Proverbs

- d. You do not buy winds with money without experiencing storms (from Yoruba “Aki ra oyi, ko maa koni loju”).
- e. One does not carry a scepter and claim supremacy of one’s family (from Benin “Ai mu ada dien egbee).
- f. If hunger is out of poverty, poverty is finished (from Yoruba “Tie bi ba kuroninu ise, ise buse).
- g. let the hawk perch, let the eagle perch, the one who says the other should not let his wings break (from Igbo “Egbe belu, ugo belu, nke sibe ya ebene

nku akwariya”).

Semantic Ambiguity in Nigerian English

Semantic ambiguity is a feature in Nigerian English. Ambiguity occurs when a word, phrase, or sentence has more than one interpretation. It is a type of meaning whose phrase or statement is not explicitly defined, making several interpretations plausible. Ambiguity gives room for uncertainty concerning meaning. Ndimele (1999:p.14) defines ambiguity “as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation”. It is very difficult to narrow down the exact or intended meaning since the interpretation is not one-sided. Ambiguity is divided into two types:

- i. Lexical ambiguity
- ii. Structural ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity occurs when a sentence or construction has more than one meaning due to the presence of a particular word. Lexical ambiguity, a construction deemed to have more than one meaning as a result of the presence of a specific example word in it (Ogbulogo, 2005: p.36).

- a. I will see you at the bank (the word ‘bank’ could mean a financial institution, riverbank, and blood bank in the hospital).
- b. The Plant is near (The word ‘plant’ could mean electricity generator or a small tree)
- c. We have many goals (the word ‘goals’ could mean winning points in a game or aims/ objectives).

Structural ambiguity is an ambiguity that is realized when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association. It is derived from the organisation of the elements of the sentence. For Example:

- d. The government invited all Nigerian language teachers.

The statement is structurally ambiguous because it can be interpreted as:

- i. Nigerian teachers of language
 - ii. Teachers of the Nigerian language (including non-Nigerians).
- e. Boiling water can be dangerous.

The first meaning relates to ‘Boiling water (as the subject noun phrase is dangerous or the act of boiling water as a complement of the preposition is dangerous).

The Notion of Intelligibility and acceptability of Nigerian English

The ultimate purpose of language is communication. Despite the semantic variations and deviation that are associated with the Nigerian variety of English, Nigeria still requires standard British English as parameters

for standardization in Nigerian Education examinations and other areas delimiting a standard Nigerian English usage, which we claim to be a variety of the English language. The SBE cannot be used as a criterion for the standardization of Nigerian English. Standard Nigerian English can only be measured by the degree of localization, indigenization, and nativization of English in the Nigerian context. Although, it might hinder international intelligibility.

We must not lose sight of all important factors of intelligibility- Both international and intra-national (Okoro, 2009:p.168).

In proposing guidelines for the identification of an acceptable standard, we must be careful then to strike a balance between factors of divergence (e.g accents) on one hand and intelligibility on the other hand. For Nigerian English to be justifiably described as a variety of world Englishes, it must remain internationally intelligible. It is important to delimit what should be accepted as a standard Nigerian English usage as far as intelligibility is concerned.

Conclusion

Having examined various aspects of semantic features in the linguistic repertoire of Nigerians, we can say that Nigerian English is a variety of world English because of the socio-cultural elements inherent in it. The cultural and traditional environment greatly influenced the language to a greater extent. The semantic features identified in this paper marked Nigerian English as a distinct variety of world Englishes. The paper also argues that, for Nigerian English to be intelligible, acceptable, or measure with international standard, it is pertinent to delimit what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, then we can have what we call Standard Nigeria English.

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