

WRONG USAGE AS THREAT TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *English is a second language in Nigeria because it is non-indigenous, it was introduced by British Colonialists and Missionaries into the country. The roles and functions English language has assumed since its introduction into the country are outlined. Since Nigeria functions in virtually all spheres of life in English language, a variety known, internationally acceptable and intelligible exists as the Standard Nigerian English. What is really of concern is the increasing deviations noticeable in the speech and writings of Nigerians from the grammar of English. The error laden English spoken by many people in the country may well be replacing the Standard Nigerian English if the situation is not checked. The root causes of the problem are pointed out recommendations are made towards curbing the negative trend.*

KEYWORDS: *English language, Standard Nigerian English, grammar, errors, varieties of English, second language, mother tongue.*

INTRODUCTION

As a widely used language, English is spoken in many regions of the world, and like other languages, it passed through stages of development to become the English language of the present day. English developed from Germanic and Romance (Latin) sources and it is traced to the Indo-European language family. It is spoken as a native language in Britain, America, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Africa and Ireland and as a non-native language in many other nations of the world (Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2012). Similarly, Igbinnosa and Igbinnosa (2010) state that English is a West Germanic language that is rooted in Anglo-Saxon England. Colonization and its sundry impacts such as military, political, scientific, economic and cultural domination helped the British Empire in 18th, 19th and 20th centuries to export the language to many parts of the world. Presently, English language has become the lingua franca in many countries of the world. Its use as a second language is pervasive. It is the official language in Commonwealth countries and many international organizations, and it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

The position of English as a global language indicates that it is no longer the exclusive cultural property of the native speakers of English. Second language speakers of English outnumber the native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1, Nigeria ranks third position with a population of 79 million speakers after United States (251 million speakers) and India (90 million speakers). This constitutes 53% of total Nigerian population (estimate 148 million) in which 4 million speak English as first language and over 75 million as second language (Wikipedia, 2009). Modern English described by David (2004) as the first global lingua franca is the dominant international language in communication, science, business, aviation, entertainment, radio and diplomacy. Its spread has continued even more prominently since

the United States attained the super power status after World War II. According to Onoyovwi (2010), English in Nigeria underscores the fact that the language is non-indigenous to Nigeria. It came to Nigeria in the 16th century and its learning became institutionalized in the 18th century by the British colonialists and missionaries. After the amalgamation of the North and South in 1914, English language developed not only into a lingua Franca among the educated, but also as the undeclared national language (Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas, 2005).

English language assumed and performed many roles and functions before independence in Nigeria. Akporokah (2012) observes that English language has been widely used in the propagation of education in Nigeria and it is used in all facets of education. This seems to be the most important function of English in our society. It is also the language of government in Nigeria because almost the transactions in government offices are carried out in English language. Minutes, official correspondence, memoranda, circular, instructions and directives are given out in the English language. Proceedings of meetings are written and conducted in English in government offices. Most government protocol and propaganda are carried out in English. In commerce and industry, transactions are mostly carried out in the English language. It is the only language used in the board rooms during meetings by members of staff. Inter and intra business transactions are done in English language. Transactions in the banking halls are carried out in English. Trading in the stock exchange market is also performed in the English language. As a language of international communication, English becomes a readily available language to be used either in the country or outside the country. English language is the most extensively used language in the Nigerian media that is both print and electronic media. English is the language of law and legal drafting as almost all the books in law are written in English. The 1979 constitution is written in English. It is as well the language of science and technology and information and technology. It is also the language of social interactions among the people who are from various ethnic groups, be it for interpersonal communication or in most social gatherings.

The Nigerian nation and its people are obviously in a relationship which is inevitable with English language and it will remain so for a long time. For a language so crucial to a nation and its people, it remains to be seen why its teaching is neglected at all levels by government. The people pay little attention and show no interest in internalizing the language in its correct form. English language spoken and written by a vast majority of educated Nigerians is laden with errors. This manifests in sectors such as education the media both print and electronic, entertainment (Music and the film industry), and government to mention a few. Though scholars have agreed that there is a Standard Nigerian English as a variety just as there are many other varieties worldwide, errors committed by Nigerians are not noticeable in other varieties of second language speakers of English. The form of incorrect English that is not acceptable in the educational system cannot be acceptable or intelligible at the international level. If something is not done urgently by government and the educational sector about this situation, the wrong form of English may gradually become acceptable and regarded as a Nigerian variety of English.

Varieties of English and Nigerian English

The spread of English language beyond the shores of Britain where it originates has brought about the different varieties of the language. Studies (Dazie and Awonusi 2009, Nwaiwu 2008) show that the speakers of the language now total seven hundred million against the

estimate of Baugh and Thomas (1983) of three hundred and fifty million, which the 1985 UNESCO report confirms were only for natives who constitute only thirteen percent of the population of the speakers of English language. Recent development of the world becoming a global village through computers and the internet has necessitated the infiltration of a number of varieties (Nwaiwu, 2012).

Varieties of English are “lects” of English found in different parts of the world. Among the varieties identified with native speakers include the British English, American English, Canadian English, New Zealand English, South African English among others. On the other hand, non-native speaker varieties include Indian, Singaporean, Jamaican, Caribbean and Nigerian varieties. Within a particular variety, there may be a number of sub types as there are in the “lects” that make up the British variety to include Scottish, Welsh and Irish English. This is exactly the problem with the standard Nigerian English (SNE) which has to contend with multiplicity of ‘lects’ which not only impede functional communication but threatens the future of communication in the country (Awonusi, 2009 in Nwaiwu, 2012).

As far as Nigerian English is concern, there are conflicting views among scholars. For the likes of Banjo, Jibril, Afolayan, Bamgbose etc, there is a consensus that there is a Nigerian English (NE) with varieties or sociolects according to ethnic, social and educational distinctions. According to Banjo (2005), Nigerian English exists in its own right as the localized, nativized or the nigerianized variant with the distinctive features of intonation, diction and idiomatic expressions. As such, not all deviation from the British English should be classified as error. Banjo (2005) comments that as far back as 1966, following Grieve’s report to the West African Examination Council on the status of English language in the educational system of the country, the concept of a standard form of the Nigerian English was born. The concept still in operation, refers to the English that has high prestige at home and reasonably easy intelligibility abroad. It should pass the test of grammaticality, intelligibility and acceptability internationally. Oluwole in Bamgbose (2005) notes that this is the English of the educated, the acrolect that has little or no mother tongue interference and is closest to the standard British English (BrE).

The Standard Nigerian English is internationally intelligible and generally acceptable but once the common core criterion disappears off a class of English dialect and invariable becomes a new language, it can hardly be generally acceptable and cannot be intelligible internationally. Nwaiwu (2012) opines that this is the case with a number of substandard varieties that now infiltrate into Nigerian writings in the name of standard variety. A cursory look at the nation’s daily newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines and journals, fictions, text messages and textbooks reveals that significant number of expressions contained in their writings lack the criteria of acceptability and intelligibility. The current trend of wide spread use of deviant expressions by Nigerian in the English language is what Nwaiwu (2012) refers to as sub-standard Nigerian English, which educated Nigerians need not to be associated with.

Errors in the English of Nigerians

It is acknowledged that there is a Standard Nigerian English. The Standard Nigerian English is however threatened by the wide spread wrong usage. The deviations are clear errors because speakers do not adhere to the rules of the grammar of the language. Though it has been said that not all deviations from the standard British English are errors, non conformity

with the rules of English grammar is error. A brief explanation of the term may help put issues in clear perspective at this point. In the course of learning a second language, learners regularly produce utterances in speech and writing which judged by the rules of the target language, are erroneous or mal-formed. Deviation from the rules of the language constitutes an error or may cause a breakdown in communication. Errors are therefore unacceptable forms and patterns that occur in the speech and writing of speakers and users of a language. They occur in such areas as phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis and usage (Okafor, 2010). Error Analysis has its origin in the rationalist theory of learning propounded by Chomsky. To the rationalist, man possesses some innate capacity that predisposes him to look for basic patterns in language. In the course of this, he may commit errors, which in any case should be seen as facilitative rather than inhibitory in the learning process. An error according to Headbloom (1979) is a systematic deviation from the target language by a non-native speaker. It is a breach of the language code which is made up of set of rules for generating well formed sentences. When the rules are not applied accurately, it may result in error.

The errors which occur in the English of Nigerians are committed because of clear ignorance or misapplication of the rules that are inherent in the English language. Corroborating this, Onoyovwi (2010) indicates that the volume of ungrammaticality pervasive among the elite is a pointer to the fact that relegation of intensive teaching of grammar cannot produce a standard level of English that is internationally acceptable. It is common to hear embarrassing grammar when a highly educated personality is called on to speak especially in the aspect of subject-verb concord. We cannot defend aberrant forms base on ignorance of the basic rules of the English language as variety because this will fall short of the two tests for determining varieties globally (Okafor, 2010). English being a second language to a vast majority of Nigerians is an excuse for many not to strive to achieve competence in the language. No internationally acceptable variety for instance will condone incorrect sentences and expressions made everyday by prominent Nigerians such as the following:

A - There are things that determines success.

- *The woman have gone out.*
- *The boy have the right to talk.*
- *I saw them as they are coming.*
- *We want to see how we can be able to do it*
- *I can do it more better than him.*
- *The man have two children.*
- *That is the type of things that happens to our people.*
- *They are issues that has to do with planning.*

(Culled from discussions on national television and radio).

What explanation can be given for grammatical errors such as these by people long after graduating from high institutions of learning, other than ignorance of the subject-verb agreement and other rules of grammar? The right forms of the sentences are:

- *There are things that determine success.*
- *The woman has gone out.*
- *The boy has the right to talk.*
- *I saw them as they were coming.*

- *We want to see how we can do it.*
- *I can do it better than him.*
- *The man has two children.*
- *That is the type of thing that happens to our people.*
- *They are issues that have to do with planning.*

Some other errors of expression include:

B-*You will appreciate with me the efforts of the government*

- *The union is worried on the issue of minimum wage.*
- *Half bread is better than none.*
- *The woman has hot temper.*
- *Audu plays better than all his mates.*
- *My names are John Musa Enahoro.*
- *I am an indigene of Ankpa.*
- *She has added more weight.*
- *I prefer rice than yam.*

(Culled from discussions on national television and radio).

The correct forms are:

- *You will also appreciate as I do the efforts of government.*
- *The union is worried about the issue of minimum wage.*
- *Half loaf is better than none.*
- *The woman has a short tempter.*
- *Audu plays better than any of his mates.*
- *My name is John Musa Enohoro.*
- *I am a native of Ankpa.*
- *She has put on weight.*
- *I prefer rice to yam.*

In Nigeria most people use English in addition to their first language or mother tongue. Mother tongue interference cause many people to use English the same way they use their mother tongue. For this reason the use of English in Nigeria is special. However, errors especially grammatical ones cannot be justified after learning is expected to have taken place. Since languages are not the same, it is normal that different rules govern different languages. For instance, errors in sentences A above are indicative of ignorance of the basic rules of the grammar of English which ought to be mastered at the primary and secondary levels of schooling. In Igala language, the language of the author for example, the subject-verb agreement rule does not exist. Both singular and plural subjects take on the same form of verbs, examples are:

<i>Ya</i>	<u><i>Li</i></u>	<i>he</i>	<u><i>sees</i></u>
<i>ma</i>	<u><i>li</i></u>	<i>they</i>	<u><i>see</i></u>
<i>ya</i>	<i>tegu</i>	<i>he</i>	<u><i>climbs</i></u>
<i>ma</i>	<u><i>tegu</i></u>	<i>they</i>	<u><i>climb</i></u>
<i>ya</i>	<u><i>je</i></u>	<i>she</i>	<u><i>eats</i></u>
<i>ma</i>	<u><i>je</i></u>	<i>they</i>	<u><i>eat</i></u>

Abo a lo ti aja.

Amone a lo ti aja.

Abo goes to the market.

people go to the market.

Aye ne amoma wewe. Aye has many children.
 Onalo pkai Idu ne amoma wewe. Onalo and idu have many children.
 Oma koche otakada. Oma reads her book.
 Me koche amotakada. they read their books.

The example above is an aspect of grammar which shows that Nigerian languages are different from English. The same could be said about other levels like phonology, morphology, semantics etc. It is expected that in learning any language, the fact that languages have different rules should be taken into consideration to enable learners learn the target language with its inherent peculiarities. This may account for why other countries like Ghana, Kenya etc where English is also a second language, people use English with less noticeable errors.

Issues Responsible for wrong usage of English by Nigerians

In any second language (L2) learning situation, learner errors are inevitable. In the case of Nigeria, learners study English language mostly in school against the backdrop of their first language or mother tongue which they have acquired in their communities. Researches on language teaching focus on learner errors which reveal that there are sources of other differences with the target language. Proponents of error analysis distinguish between errors, which occur “interlingually” and those which take place intralingually. The term “interlanguage” is referred to as the approximation system” and the “idiosyncratic dialect” of the language. All can simply be defined as “the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language. “Intra-lingual errors” are those which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply (Selinkers, 1974, Nemser, 1971, Corlar, 1971 and Richard, 1971, in Okafor, 2010).

The problem with the use of English by Nigerians is that errors such as described above do not only occur in their use of English at the different stages of learning the language but even long after they are expected to have mastered the workings of the language. The reason for this may not be far fetched when a close look is taken at the practice in the educational system of the country. According to Onoyovwi (2010), in the earliest days of the introduction of English as a language of education in Nigeria, there was adequate emphasis on grammar. Through intensive use of drills, substitution tables, fill in etc, a pupil mastered the rudiments of grammar by the end of primary school. Unfortunately, when the teaching of structures (structuralism) came in the late sixties, this method which immersed the learner in the rudiments of grammar branded as ‘traditional grammar’ was neglected in pursuit of Chomsky’s ‘communicative competence’. Methods and texts changed in a bid to have the L2 learner acquire English as the mother tongue (MT) user. The major problem here as Onoyovwi (2010) points out, is the L2 user is not exposed to the same volume of raw linguistic data as the mother tongue user. The L2 speaker learns it in school after which he reverts to his MT, so reinforcement through daily social interaction is absent.

Having reviewed the curriculum for English in the secondary school, Azikiwe (2007) comments that:

*The reason for the neglect of grammar could be as
 a result of the call for second language learners
 to learn L2 just like the native speakers hence,*

*the recent emphasis on the use of the direct
natural method in second language lessons.*

Regarding this, Azikiwe summarizes that the failure in English at terminal examinations increases at an alarming rate. It is clear that learners of English language since the adoption of the new approach have learned English without intensive teaching of its grammar. This negligence has existed for long as it was exposed when the Lagos State Ministry of Education in 1991 organized a workshop for teachers on “Teaching Grammar for Communication”. It was discovered that only 25% of them taught some form of grammar at all, and they also went through training without being taught grammar. The products of those teachers are now teachers and lecturers in schools. It follows naturally that the present day teachers are unable to teach what they do not know.

In the primary school level, a teacher teaches all the subjects in his or her class including English language. Some teachers may not be as knowledgeable in the language as expected as many exhibit a complete lack of mastery of English. This accounts for why the bane of teachers in public schools at this level is the use of local languages for instruction though, in the most uncoordinated manner. Any attempt by the teachers to speak English usually results into speaking pidgin English to the pupils (Alhassan, 2010). English lessons conducted by these teachers will make anybody wonder whether they are aware of the existence of a scheme of work or a syllabus to be adhered to. Such teachers (Umolu in Alhassan, 2010) refers to as teachers of English who teach reading using inappropriate strategies such that pupils simply parrot words after them without understanding the meaning of the forms that they pretend to read. Commenting on the crop of incompetent teachers pervading the educational institutions in the country, Omole (2008) notes that the knowledge of English exhibited by many primary and secondary school teachers is indeed appalling be it in spelling, grammar or pronunciation.

The decreasing number and scarcity of English language teachers in schools complicate issues further. Schools operate with only one or no English language teacher. In such schools, teachers who were not trained as English language teachers are allowed to teach the language whether they have mastery of the language or not. The perennial neglect suffered by these two tiers of education can only leave its mark on the educational system. The primary and secondary levels of learning are very crucial stages of learning. They are the formative stages where most habits and skills are developed. But not much attention is given to activities going on (especially in public schools) where majority of Nigerian children obtain their primary and secondary education. The prevalent wrong usage of English by many Nigerians is a repercussion of the situation in Nigerian public schools. Like Clark, (1995) rightly points out; as teaching goes, so goes the nation.

CONCLUSION

As a second language in Nigeria, English has been adopted for a wide range of functions. The situation is the same for many African countries and the world over. Learning and functioning in it certainly have their attendant problems. A clear aberration and deviation from Standard English need not to be considered as any form of variety in Nigeria. The earlier stakeholders in education tackle the menace and nip it in the bud, the better for the future of the English language in Nigeria. As Onoyovwi (2010) suggests, let our contribution not be bad grammar, we cannot afford to defend deviant forms based on ignorance of basic rules of the English language as 'Nigerian English'. Have you ever wondered at the English of Ghanaians?, Onoyovwi (2010) asks. If we try hard enough, we can do better, rather than ignore or defend forms which are obviously and globally faulty.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to arrest the problem of wrong usage of English in Nigeria, scholars need to agree on what errors are and when deviations occur in the English of Nigerians. The idea that not all deviations are errors creates some confusion. Deviations regarded as errors in India, Ghana, Kenya and so on should be regarded as errors in Nigeria as well.

Rather than adopting a sit-on-the-fence attitude, government both at the local and federal levels should encourage the effective teaching and learning of English. All necessary efforts must be made to ensure that the language in which Nigerians function in all spheres of life is well taught and learned. This should be by the provision of equipment and personnel, as well as supervision and monitoring in schools at primary and secondary levels.

The adoption of communicative language teaching approach is not yielding good results here in Nigeria. There is a need for the teaching of the grammar of English in schools. This will help learners recognize that the language is rule governed and also help improve their skills in grammar. The teaching of Oral English should be introduced at the primary school level.

The teaching of English language at the secondary school level should not be for all. It should be for qualified and trained teachers. Workshops and retraining programmes should be organized for such teachers to update their knowledge and methods.

The teaching profession needs to be made more appealing to draw more people into it. Good incentives should be given to English teachers as this will help curb their declining number in schools.

Provision of language teaching aids and language laboratories in schools is important in order to enhance the learning of English especially in teacher training institutions. Well trained teachers will be in better position to teach English appropriately.

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