

**DOMESTICATION OF THE ENGLISH IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN NIGERIA:
PROSPECTS FOR STANDARD NIGERIAN ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT: *The English language has co-existed in Nigeria with her many indigenous languages since 19th Century. Naturally languages in contact influence each other. Indeed it is not only languages that come in contact but also people, their culture and experience. The relatedness of language and culture cannot be underscored in the study of English as a second language in Nigeria because it is acceptability within a culture and linguistic environment that dictates what will eventually be standard in a speech community. In this paper, the researchers examined the cultural imperative of domestication of English idioms in Nigeria. The subject of the research was one hundred educated Nigerians selected through random sampling technique using the level of exposure to the two languages as the yardstick for stratification. The subjects were selected from federal institutions from four geo political zones in Nigeria. Two hundred idiomatic phrases were given to the subjects to write on. Each subject was to write on two popular idioms in not more than 250 words, explaining the origin and meaning of the given idioms. Four native- speakers from Scotland working in Shell were equally asked to interpret the idioms to determine the level of intelligibility of Nigerian English idioms. Based on their interpretations, the researchers concluded that environment, culture and experience work in concert to re-fashion the English idioms and recommend that stable local idioms should be documented and accepted as Standard Nigerian English (SNE) both nationally and internationally.*

KEYWORD: Domestication, English idiomatic phrases, standard Nigerian English.

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying the fact established by Ayo (1971) that of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of Colonial administration, none is more important than the English language. Today most scholars corroborate Ayo's declaration as they claim that the English language is now the national language, the language of government, the language of

instruction in schools, the language of business and commerce and the language of internal communication among Nigerians of differing language background.

But Agbada (1993) sees this as a bogus claim. Agbada questioned the extent to which the English language performs these functions ascribed to it strictly and religiously alone without influence from Nigerian indigenous language, culture and environment. Sefenwa (1975) captures the scene perfectly when he says; Even though the civil service which used to be the most prestigious and largest employer of labour and other well established employers still insist that a candidate for employment should have a credit in the school certificate English language examination, it will be interesting to know how much English is actually used in the day- to- day discharge of official duties and in communication with colleagues, supervisors and the public (P.3).

The truth is that however strongly we stamp the English expressions on our memories, the native languages will always be stronger. In fact, despite the prestigious position the English language occupies in Nigeria, the citizens will always resort to their mother tongue at the slightest opportunity. This situation is traceable to what Sapir Whorfian School of linguistic theory refers to as linguistic relativity .Whorf (1956) has it that the world is presented in a Kaleidoscopic flux of expressions which has to be organized by our minds- and this means largely by the linguistic system in our mind .So people fall back on their dialects because is already innate. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts and ascribe significance as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way; an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is of course, implicit and unstated, but its term is absolutely obligatory (Whorf 1956)

The English language has gained worldwide prominence but there is no unitary international agreed on and codified standard because it is a world language and there are many different stakeholders. English is not a monolithic language, it has co-existed in Nigeria with her numerous indigenous languages since 19th century. The many years of co-existence with Nigerian indigenous languages and its use for expressing Nigerian experience and culture have resulted in the English language developing distinct linguistic patterns that have identified it as a variety of World English termed Nigerian English (NE) (cf Walsh 1967, Ayo 1971, Omodiagbe,1992). It has develop changes that reflect the sociolinguistic realities in the new setting.(Opara 2016)

The issues stated above necessitates the question such as was asked by Ayo (1971), are we going to teach Nigerian children like their counter part in Britain and America, or are we from the very beginning going to teach Nigerian English, a brand of English that is socially accepted in Nigeria and at the same time internationally acceptable? In response, Achebe (1965) declares that the English language to teach will be one that is able to carry the weight of African experience that will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding.

Ekpe (2006) concurs as he defines the English Language as a language with many colours which has been globalized. Thus, globalization has caused English to play unaccustomed roles in various countries. In a country like Nigeria where English is employed as a second language, occasional

deviations from Standard British English are bound to occur and distinctive forms are bound to develop. The undeniable diffused occurrence of Nigerian variant of English idioms led the researchers to assert that English idiom has been domesticated in Nigeria. Rather than wander into the controversy as to whether the variant forms are errors or manifestations of incomplete learning, the researchers' interest is to reveal how the imperatives of culture and environment re-fashioned the English idioms to produce partially or totally new idioms that bear the weight of Nigeria experiences and recommend that distinctive idiomatic phrases, that did not alter SBE interpretation should be documented and accepted as standard Nigeria English and not be treated as error. It is the degree of Nigerianisms that characterize different aspects of English grammar that makes it Nigerian English (Jowitt 2007).

DOMESTICATION

In this study, English is said to be domesticated when it acquires distinctive forms and features as a result of its contact for a considerable length of time with new languages, culture and environment, Eka (2007 : 8 – 9). These forms do not violate the rules of grammar. Domestication in this contexts are stable modifications and peculiar features that English manifest in Nigerian context, that is, those variant English idiomatic phrases that reflect Nigerian linguistic environment and culture. The forms that are socially acceptable among the educated Nigerians.

DEFINITION OF STANDARD

According to Jowitt (2007:2) a standard is a variety against which other varieties are evaluated. In such variety, there is an expectation that other varieties will grow into conformity with it (the standard variety). Jowitt states that it is the community though not all members of the community that decide what is a standard variety of a language and what is not and what are standard usages and what are not.

NIGERIAN ENGLISH (NE)

On the bases of the above statement, we have defined Nigerian English as that variety of world English learnt, spoken and written by educated Nigerians who are born and brought up within Nigerian environment (Eka 2007: 15).

Standard Nigerian English(SNE)

Banjo (1971) defines Standard Nigerian English as a variety of English which is socially acceptable in Nigeria and internationally intelligible. It is an institutionalized sub-variety of world English (Jowitt, 2007: 6). It is close to Standard British English (SBE).(Kejuro 1985) Nevertheless, it has features which distinguish it from SBE.

The question here is: Can't English idioms be altered to bear Nigerian weight and culture? The fact established in this paper is that those slight deviations in English idioms in Nigerian that are of trivia consequences should be accepted as variant forms not errors.

Idiomatic Expressions

The word 'idiom' according to Barnet and Stubbs (1977:241) is from Greek word meaning peculiar that is, a fixed group of words peculiar to a given language. Continuing, these scholars state that idioms generally have different origins which to a large extent determine their interpretations and that some idioms are traceable from the origins of the component parts with a metaphorical or metonymical association that is basic to human cognitive ability. The implication is that even when a component part is borrowed from another language it still retains its associative meaning in that particular idiomatic expression. The way we express our selves in our languages separate us from other societies. Indeed, idioms normally show how language reflects its cultures in words and phrases.

Loreto and Ian (1986:413) believe that an idiom comprehends the specific characteristics of language, dialect or speech community. It is not based on logic nor is it based on customs and conventions of our society. We can see clearly from Loreto and Ian perspectives that idioms adapt to a particular behaviour suitable to it in a specific language. They are conventions, habits, idiosyncrasy that allow speakers of a given language to express ideas, facts, fears, prejudice, aspirations, vision in a unique manner.

This means that the peculiar nature of idiom often enables it to violate conventional rules of grammars in all languages. An idiom is something beyond the simple combination of phrases. Words are idiosyncratic. They are not easily translated into another language (Nalls, 1989: 51).

On his own part, Roberston (1986:22) sees an idiom as a syntactical pattern peculiar to a certain language and hence often untranslatable in literal equivalents into another language. For Fowler (1986: 410), idioms are expressions in any language whose meaning cannot be determine simply from words in them or whose component parts cannot be predicted by any rules of grammar. They violate conventional rules of grammar. It is obvious that idioms are eccentric. People have intentions which enable them to judge an idiom, and most idioms spring from different customs and culture and the modality of usage is based on context.

On the Contrary, Nwoke (2009) laments that Nigerian idiomatic expressions are misused. Nwoke sees Nigerian English idiomatic expression as errors. Nwoke fails to understand that Nigerians cannot express and interpret idioms based on American or British context. For him, the Nigerian English idioms are violations of SBE idiomatic expressions. Indeed, idioms are universal expressions but they have their peculiarities in different socio-linguistics environments.

Nigerian linguistic environment and culture serve as the mediating factor in shaping and remodeling the received English fixed phrases and idiomatic expressions. Nigerian styles exist in all aspects of grammar, syntax semantics, stylistics as well as idiomatic expressions. The variant forms should be seen as indexical markers to SNE; a healthy sign to the emergence of SNE.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted in the study is systematic functional theory (SFT) propounded by Halliday (1973). The reasons for this is that the theoretical model emphasizes the study of language from the perceptive of context. The model focuses on the relationship between forms and functions and sees the context of meaning and culture as central to the interpretation of meaning in a language. The fact is that language is believed to exert influence on how humans conceptualize their experiences.

The Systemic Functional Theory is basically designed to account for how language functions to convey meaning that language users want to convey in a given context. In this study, we emphasized on the contextual aspect of the theory. The study examines how the linguistic environment and culture work in concert to alter the English idioms so as to give rise to new variant forms that are able to carry the weight of Nigerian experience.

The theory establishes the fact that context of situation and culture lead speakers to choose differently from the repertoire of the language at their disposal. In other words, what people say and what is going on in their linguistic environment influence their usage. Language evolves in response to the specific demands of the society in which it is used and the primary essence of language is communication. As the SFT analyses language based on contexts, it therefore provides the framework for the explanations of linguistic peculiarities in Nigeria linguistic settings. The study of language in specific contexts and socio-cultural setting is very important as it will afford a deeper interpretations of the variables in new Englishes .

METHODOLOGY

The subjects of this research were one hundred Nigerians of varied educational background selected through stratified random sampling techniques from thirty linguistic groups in Nigeria using the number of years of exposure to English language as well as the level of knowledge of their dialect as the yard stick for stratification. Their educational qualification ranges from National Certificate in Education (NCE) to PhD. Their age range was equally considered because the researchers acknowledged the fact that people between 45 and 60 years of age would be able to explain the origin and meaning of the idiomatic expressions in their speech communities. The age range was from 45-60 years. The subjects were selected from Federal Government institutions from four geo-political zones in Nigeria. These include; Federal University of technology ,Owerri, University of Uyo, University of Lagos and University of Maiduguri. It was believed that the Federal institutions will have citizens from different ethnic groups and levels of education.

The following tables show the socio-cultural grouping of the subjects.

TABLE 1 SOCIO-CULTURAL GROUPS OF THE SUBJECTS

Variables	Number of subjects
Civil servant with OND	10
Civil servant with NCE	40
B .A/BSc Holders	30
M .A holders	10
Phd holders	10

Variables	No. of Subjects
Hausa	4
Yoruba	8
Efik	2
Ibibio	2
Nembe	2
Igala	2
Igbo	20
Kalakuma	4
Igala	2
Ikwere	10
Etche	8
Ogoni	3
Okirika	2
Kala	4
Brass	3
Nupe	2
Idoma	2
Iyalla	2
Buguma	3
Dokun	2
Bata	2
Agbor	5
Ennan	2
Opobo	6
PROFESSIONAL SKILLS	
Lecturers/ Teachers	30
Administrative officers	18
Accountants	10
Librarians	10
Businessmen/women	10
Medical doctors	10
Technical staff	12

Two hundred variant idiomatic forms that have high frequency of occurrence in Nigerian context were selected for the subjects to write on. Each subject was to write on two idiomatic expressions in not more than 250 words, buttressing the origin and meaning of the idioms and possible reason for the deviation from SBE. The idioms were culled from some African literature read by the researchers, recommended text books and Nigerian newspapers.

The data was further subjected to intelligibility test. Intelligibility is seen in this study as the extent to which linguistic data is judged by the native speaker to be easily understood (Crystal 1997,p.7) In addition to 100 non –native speakers the services of four native speakers assessors were engaged to determine the international intelligibility of the idiomatic expressions .They were Scottish employees of Shell company in Porthcourt and have only lived in Nigeria for two months. The degree of intelligibility of Nigerian idiomatic expressions was determined by evaluating the level of comprehension of the variant idioms by the four native speakers. They were to give their interpretations and understanding of the variant forms. They were born and brought up in England and English is their first language.

The methodological approach adopted in this research was guided by two important points raised in Holliday's SFT that language is totally dependent on the context in which it is used and that meaning in language is interpretable in terms of function and culture.

FINDINGS

Idioms in SNE manifest some deviations from English idioms. We observed that SBE idioms were used with slightly different morphological forms in NE. However, the variations do not impede effective communication. In most cases, the variant forms in SNE share the same semantic sense. Even when some component parts are altered to suit Nigerian experiences, the idioms still retain their associative meanings in English. In most cases, the adaptation often turns out to be most analytical and more literal, thus making meaning more explicit (Abgada, 1983). For instance, instead of saying beggars cannot be choosers as English would, Nigerians will say a beggars has no choice. As Agbada (1983) rightly explains the Nigerian version underline more strongly the fact that a beggar is an utterly helpless fellow. There is no possibility at all for the beggars. While the English makes it seem as though they can accept whatever they are given. The emphasis on the Nigerian version is that it is an impossibility not probability.

Table 2 Variations in SBE/SNE idioms.

SBE idiomatic phrases	SNE Forms
To have one's cake and eat it	To eat one's cake and have it
To cut your coat according to your cloth	To cut your coat according to your size
Beggars are not choosers	A beggar has no choice
Not all that glitters is gold	All that glitters is not gold
When in Rome do as the Roman does	When you are in Rome do like the Romans
Jump, climb or get on the band wagon	To join the band wagon
More power to your elbow	More grease to your elbow
Out of frying pan into fire	From frying pan to fire
To bite the hand that fed one	To bite the finger that fed one
To recite off hand	To recite off head
Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander	What is good for the goose is good for the gander
To have long arm	To have long leg
Counting your chick before they hatch	Counting your chicken before they hatch
Play to the gallery	Playing to the gallery
Add insult to injury	Add salt to injury
Actions speak louder than words	Actions speaks louder than voice
To butter someone up	To butter someone's bread
The devil finds work for idle mind	The idle mind is devil's work shop
A stone's throw	A stone throw
A little learning is a dangerous thing	Little education is dangerous
To read the writing on the wall	To read the hand writing on the wall
To fish in troubled water	To fish in trouble water
A problem shared is a problem halved	A problem shared is half solved
Other things being equally	All things being equal.
Don't take the law into your hands	Don't take laws into your hands
To hold up to ridicule	To hold to ridicule
Below one's dignity	Beneath one's dignity
Once in a blue moon	Once in blue moon
To rain cats and dogs	To rain cat and dog
To keep up appearance	To put up appearance
To keep one's eyes skinned	To shine your eye
To meet minds	To rob minds

To lick somebody's boot	To lick somebody's feet
To rack one's brain	To crack one's brain
The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know	The devil you know is better than the angel you don't know.
Make hay while the sun shines	Make haste while the sun shines
The straw that breaks the camel's back	The last straw that breaks the camel's back
Ride a winning horse to death	Ride a willing horse to death
By hook or by crook	By hook or crook
To take into one's confidence	To take into confidence
To drag someone's name through the mire	The drag someone's name to the mud
To play a person against another	To knock people's head together
It take two to tango	It takes two to tangle
At the top of your voice	On top of your voice
To count your chick before they are hatched	To count your chicken before they hatch

The following are features typifying the Nigerian English idioms;

i) **Internal modification.** It was observed that most English idiomatic phrases were modified to suit the Nigerian contexts. However, the same impression is conveyed in the end. As O Abgada (1983) implied 'a Nigerian using idioms is simply looking for the most appropriate vehicle to convey his message, point and ideas in a forceful way ... in a word he likes to call a spade a spade.' An example is the English idiomatic phrase which reads: Joy was delivered of a child yesterday, which is modified in NE to read: Joy delivered a child yesterday. Nigerians believe that it was Joy who delivered a baby not the nurse. The aim is to emphasize the role Joy who is the subject played.

ii) **Substitution of Component Parts**

This is another type of variation observed in the data. Nigerian English speakers/writers change or substitute components of English idiomatic phrase in order to have expressions that are more meaningful in their socio-cultural environment. The idiomatic phrase which reads: sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. In Nigerian context, sauce or soup is never meant for animals, they eat mainly grass, so since Nigerians are not convenient with that, they have to substitute with words that would give a better interpretation. Sauce is thus replaced with 'good' so the domesticated version reads: what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Lereto and Ian (1986:413) also affirm that idioms comprehend the specific characteristics of language ,dialect or speech community. It is not the same in two languages but it is based on custom and convention of a speech community.

Again, if a Nigerian wants to state that another has an undue corrupt connection, he speaks of the later having long leg not long arm in the native speaker's context. Because currently at our level of technological development, if you want a person to person contact you will walk to meet the person at a particular place.

iii) **Interchange of homophones**

In this context, words that have same sound are replaced with semantically distinct words in SNE. Nigerian English speakers consciously chose words that reflect their ideas and values adequately.

Examples are in these idioms.

It takes two to tango. SBE

It takes two to tangle. SNE

I racked my brain. SBE

I cracked my brain. SNE

Make hay while the sun shines. SBE

Make haste while the sun shine.SNE

iv) **Reduction of linguistic items:**

There is the tendency to reduce excess word or the linguistic content of the English idiomatic phrases. What Nigerian English speakers do is to prune the foreign idioms of excess baggage in verbal items. They therefore strip English idioms of particles which they consider as unnecessary with a view to sounding new, thus subjecting a foreign fixed phrase to the service of their own cultural speech demands. Examples are in these idioms, where the English would say, 'don't take the law into your own hands,' 'we succeed by hook or by crook,' Nigerian version would read, 'don't take law into your hands', 'we succeed by hook or crook'. 'To hold up to the ridicule' will read, 'to hold to ridicule'. These expressions are not based on logic not grammatical rules.

The research data revealed a number of English idioms that were reconstructed to suit Nigerian context. For example, the English would say 'more power to your elbow', but Nigerian will say more grease to your elbow. In fact, strength to Nigerians resides in the muscles not elbow and muscles need to be greased. Again, 'the idioms don't drag someone else's name through the mire', is reconstructed to read don't drag someone else's name in the mud. To the Nigerians, mud makes more meaning than 'mire' which is only a component of swampy and marshy ground. From these observations, it is obvious that Nigerian culture influences the English idiomatic expression.

We can see that the variations in English idiomatic phrases are not as a result of poor learning by Nigerians rather they are culture-specifics. They are reflections of the nexus of culture and should be treated as variety specifics and linguistic markers

v) Other variations include; change in number e.g. raining cat and dog, instead of cats and dogs in SBE, Omission and wrong insertion of articles and adjective were also observed in the data.

Intelligibility test

Table 3 Summary of SNE idioms intelligibility test

S/N	A	Native speaker assessor			Non native speakers assoc		
		B1	C	D	B2	C	D
	Variation Types	No of English Idioms	Well Understood	Not Understood	No of English Idioms	Well Understood	Not Understood
1	Internal modification	40	33		40	40	0
2	Substitution of component	40	37		40	40	0
3	Interchange of homophones	40	38		40	40	-0
4	Change in number	40	32		40	40	0
5	Omission / insertion of articles	40	35		40	40	0
	Total	200	175	87.5%		200	100%

The data reveals that Nigerian English idioms are nationally and internationally intelligible. Column A reveals the variation types while B1 and B2 show the number of idioms, columns C and D denote the numbers of idiomatic expression understood or not understood by the assessors. The data showed that out of 200 idiomatic expressions 175 (87.5 %) were understood by the native speakers assessors while 25 idiomatic phrases – (12.5) were not understood. On the other hand the non-native speakers understood all the English idiomatic expressions.

The fact is that variant English idiomatic expressions do not hinder national and international intelligibility. As Adegba (2003:91) rightly observes, idioms are universal, yet peculiar in different sociolinguistic environments. We can see clearly from the study that idioms adapt to a particular behaviour suitable to it in a specific language. It is not based on logic nor is it the same in any two languages. This means that the peculiar nature of idioms permit them sometimes to violate conventional rules of grammar. In fact, even when a component part is borrowed from another language it still retains its meaning in that particular idiomatic expression, for instance,

the idiomatic expression: The devil finds work for idle hands, in English means the same thing as an idle mind is devil's work shop, in Nigerian version .

The findings counter Nwoke (2009) believe that the English idiomatic expressions must be exactly the same in Nigerian linguistic environment. Nigerian English idioms should carry the weight of Nigerian experience not British or American experience. Hence what Nwoke terms poor standard Nigerian English should be seen as indexical markers to SNE.

The crucial aim of English usage in this age of globalization is communication. Hence Nigerian English idioms that share the same semantic sense with native English idioms and are nationally and internationally intelligible should be accepted as standard Nigerian expression.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian style exists in all aspects of English both in spoken and written forms. Nigerian English is nourished by its roots and the roots are in the people who habitually use it. If Nigerian English does not grow through nourishment from Nigerian roots, but only have SBE forms grafted upon it without local adaptation, it will become an artificial language. Language is an expression of culture. Therefore as the two languages come in contact, linguistic items filter across the two languages and result to a new brand of the English Language termed Nigerian English. Thus English has been domesticated in Nigeria. In fact, the native speakers should strive to improve on their comprehension of other varieties of English. Why should Nigerians stress themselves to speak and write English exactly as the British or Americans? They should let the British and the Americans accept the Nigerian variety of English. By doing so, Nigerian English in the near future will be accepted as Standard English.

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