




British or American English? A Survey of Variety Preference in the English of L2 University Undergraduates

Julianah Ajoke Akindele 
Osun State University, Osogbo-Nigeria
julianah.akindele@uniosun.edu.ng

Victor Ayomide Fabunmi 
Osun State University, Osogbo-Nigeria
Ayo_fabunmi@yahoo.com

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Abstract: English has been observed to be a global language. The spread of English in Nigeria has also been observed to introduce several spelling discrepancies between American and British English. This phenomenon, in recent times, has been a challenge to educationists, linguists, and stake holders in academia due to the inconsistencies in use by L2 users. Extant research has established the intrusion of American English into the British English usage of many Nigerian users of English. Also, other researches establish the emergence of the Nigerian English lexical innovation Upholding this view, however, this study attempts to investigate, through survey and statistical evidence, the level at which selected Nigerian university undergraduates defer to British English lexis and orthography, and the American and Nigerian English variants. A short quiz, designed and placed in online Google form, was administered as questionnaire to students. Five hundred university undergraduates were sampled from five different universities in Nigeria. Responses were elicited from one-hundred undergraduates from each of the five selected institutions. Analysis reveals that of the ten test items administered to the respondents, six British English word variants (holiday, generator, biscuits, university, carpark, hostel) are most often used while the other four American English lexemes (kerosene, kiosk, elevator, expressway) amass high statistical usage by students. Also, the respondents prefer the British English spelling style of four (favour, fulfilment, programme, dialogue) test items while the preference of the American English style dominate other three test items (center, criticize, encyclopedia). There is rampant use

of “torch” (BrE), “salon” (BrE), and “shorts” (AmrE) despite existence of their Nigerian English variants – “torchlight”, “barbing salon”, and “shortknicker”. The study concludes that to a greater extent, the use of the American English and Nigerian English lexical and spelling conventions have not totally eroded or overwhelmed the expected British English usage.

Keywords: American English, British English, Discrepancy, Lexical and Spelling Conventions, L2 University undergraduates, Nigerian English, Variety preference

1. Introduction

In Nigeria, the English language plays the role of a second language, considering the multilingual nature of the country. English is also the official language of Nigeria. It is a compulsory subject and a yardstick for evaluating a learner’s school performance. The function of English as a second language in Nigeria and the numerous roles it plays compels every Nigerian citizen to learn and speak it (Awonuyi, 1981).

Currently, English is acclaimed to be a global language (Tierney, 2009). Colonialism has been observed to be a factor which aided its spread. The spread of English in Nigeria has also been observed to introduce several spellings discrepancies between American and British English. This phenomenon, in recent times, has been a challenge to educationists, linguists, and stakeholders in academia. This is because the English language is used as a second language in Nigeria, and linguists are still working on getting a standardised form for its use. However, the intrusion of American and British English competing with Nigerian English expressions in the English of many L2 users has made language issues in Nigeria more problematic. Sometimes, it is perceived that students tend to use the British and American spellings in their written English because students cannot differentiate between the two varieties.

Therefore, the research explores the influx of American English into the English language usage of Nigerian undergraduates, and the cause of the intra-use of British and American English varieties in the Nigerian in the English of selected Nigerian university undergraduates. The sampled students for this study are assumed to have a relative level of competence and proficiency in the use of the English language since the English language is the language of instruction in Nigeria.



2. Literature Review

Scholars (Crystal, 2003; Oguniji, 2004; Adegbite, 2008; Jowitt, 2008; Djite, 2008; Luchayar, 2015; Bamgbose, 2017; Sahid, 2019) have argued that English has become a universal language. British and American Englishes are the two national/regional varieties of English. American English is now not only a variety of English but an independent language. The differences between American English and British English are in the field of syntax, pronunciation, spellings, and vocabulary (Bauer, 2002; Algeo & Pyles, 2004).

In the 17th century, there was a very important colonisation of Britain, the colonisation was followed by trade and by the establishment of settlers. English at that time was not spoken by Americans, but then the British came there. In addition, English was used for administration, commerce and education either as the mother tongue or as a foreign or second language. The settlers from England and later from all over the British Isles founded communities which used English as their native language, not only at home and at work but also for government and law (Lingyu, 2011). American English, on the other hand, is becoming one more dialect of the world English, and it has exercised greater influence on world English than any other variety (Crystal, 1995).

American variety of English will, thus, imply the language spoken in the U.S with its geographically, politically and economically conditioned characteristics (Jankowaki, 1977). But the American English accents changed and influenced by the immigrations of the British and Germanic in the North America. American English evolved even more when the first wave of immigrants came to the country from the British Isles.

These immigrants are often called economic-immigrant, because they left the British Isles for economic reasons, to search for a new life in America. American English was considered less educated, less cultured and less beautiful than British English (Totti, 2000), but with the status of the United States in media, international business, computing and science, American English has gained as a world language (Totti, 2002:245). Furthermore, American English is more accessible to a larger and, naturally, this has made American English more international. English would have been written the same way everywhere.

However, when Noah Webster created an American English dictionary in the early 1800's, he did more than just add new words to British English: he also revised the spelling of many common words to eliminate what he saw as unnecessary letters. His new spellings were adopted in the United States but not the UK, and these spelling differences remain to this day (Skeel, 1958:234). Noah



Webster believes that American English originated from the strong desire of Americans to break z British English and its eighteenth classical traditions.

2.1 *The Nigerian English*

Nigeria is the largest nation in sub-Saharan Africa accounting for approximately 25% of the subcontinent's population. Nigeria has 529 languages; 522 are indigenous living languages; seven of these are extinct; and 11 have no known speakers (Lewis, Gary & Fennig, 2013). Nigerian English refers to the "English given a local colour but which tries as much as possible to approximate the native English" (Egwuogu 2004, p.108).

Akindele and Rotimi (2017) posit that the Nigerian English is the variety of English that has been domesticated, acculturated and indigenised by the Nigerian socio-cultural experiences and linguistics contexts. It is largely a regional variety of English, marked by its own features and used by Nigerians or simply "the variety of English spoken and used by Nigerians" (Adeniyi, 2006, p.26). The Nigerian English variety has developed in the Nigerian non-native English situation. It is "English, which has become 'nativised', 'domesticated', 'indigenised', and it has taken on distinctively Nigerian quality" (Jowitt, 2019, p. 26). This is as a result of colonialism position of the language as well as the native English culture in the country (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999). The variety thus developed is not wholly native English type and not totally Nigerian. It is a blend of two situations.

The contact of English language with other Nigerian languages has given rise to what is regarded as Nigerian English. There are debates and arguments as to the existence and acceptability of Nigerian English. Vincent (1974), for instance, sees Nigerian English as "bad English". Likewise, Salami (1968) contends that what has been identified as NE is in reality "errors of usage". The variationist school, unlike the purist, is of the view that the Nigerian English variety is not an error but a variation which arouse as a response to the communication needs of the Nigerians. The scholars in the school advocate that if variations exist even between the British English and the American English, then, English Language in Nigeria is capable of being classified as a variety of English. It is not in any way a derogatory term and one characterized by errors and non-standard forms as language purists tend to view it, neither is it one of an inferior status to others like British, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand English (Kaan, Amase, & Tsavmbu, 2013).



Akere (2004) maintains that variations exist in the Nigerian usages at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels, which distinguish it from other national varieties like American English, British English and Indian English. The Nigerian English is unique as a result of its phonological, lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic peculiarities. However, part of the objectives of this study is to find out L2 students' preference to the lexical peculiarities of the Nigerian English.

Extant researches (Ahaotu & Ndimele, 2016; Obasi, 2019) have established the intrusion of the American English into the British English usage of many Nigerian users of English. Also, other researches establish the emergence of the Nigerian English lexical innovation which arises from the blend of British and American English variants. This research acknowledges and upholds earlier views. However, this study attempts to investigate, through survey and statistical evidence, the level at which Nigerian university undergraduates defer to British English lexis and orthography, and the American and Nigerian English variants. The following research questions guide the study :

- What is the statistical performance of students in the choice of British English and American English lexical and spelling conventions?
- Do students defer more to British English lexical choices and spelling convention than they do to the American English variety?
- How often do students subscribe to the usage of the Nigerian English lexical conventions?

3. Methodology

This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative analytical approach. Five hundred University Undergraduates were sampled from five different Universities in Nigeria. Responses were elicited from one-hundred undergraduates from each of the five selected institutions: Lagos State University, Osun State University, University of Ilorin, Bayero University, and University of Benin. A short quiz, designed and placed in online Google form, was administered as questionnaire to students. Twenty test items were drawn from published research works of Ahaotu and Ndimele (2016) and Obasi (2019). These sources are preferred because they provided a long list of British English lexemes, and their American English variants, as well as the Nigerian English variants. Findings are represented in statistical tables and are discussed further.



3.1 Research Design

This study is both quantitative and qualitative. The study adopts use of questionnaire and test items drawn from published research works of Ahaotu and Ndimele (2016) and Obasi (2019). These sources are preferred because they provided a long list of British English lexemes and their American English variants, as well as the Nigerian English variants. Responses were elicited from one-hundred undergraduates from each of the five selected institutions: Lagos State University, Osun State University, University of Ilorin, Bayero University, and University of Benin. The findings are represented in statistical tables and discussed further.

3.2 Research Instrument(s)

The instrument used for the gathering of the data for this study includes Five hundred University Undergraduates from five different Universities in Nigeria. One-hundred undergraduates were selected from each of the sampled institutions which includes; Lagos State University, Osun State University, University of Ilorin, Bayero University, and University of Benin. A short quiz, designed and placed in online Google form as questionnaire for students to respond to.

3.3 Data collection and Analysis

The data for this study was gathered through a survey done among Undergraduates in Nigeria Universities. Twenty test items were drawn from published research works of Ahaotu and Ndimele (2016) and Obasi (2019). Five hundred University Undergraduates from five different Universities in Nigeria. One-hundred undergraduates were selected from each of the sampled institutions which include; Lagos State University, Osun State University, University of Ilorin, Bayero University, and University of Benin. The data gathered for this study were statistically, analysed.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Lexical variation in British and American English

Item		Potent Score	British English			American English		
			Item	Freq	%	Item	Freq	%
1	Holiday/Vacation	500	Holiday	367	73.4%	Vacation	133	26.6%



2	Generator/Dynamo	500	Generator	463	92.6%	Dynamo	37	7.4%
3	Paraffin/Kerosene	500	Paraffin	63	12.6%	Kerosene	437	87.4%
4	Cookies/Biscuit	500	Biscuits	398	79.6%	Cookies	102	20.4%
5	Booth/Kiosk	500	Booth	203	40.6%	Kiosk	297	59.4%
6	Lift/Elevator	500	Lift	162	32.4%	Elevator	338	67.6%
7	Motorway/Expressway	500	Motorway	58	11.6%	Expressway	442	88.4%
8	University/College	500	University	434	86.8%	College	67	13.2%
9	Car park/Parking lot	500	Car Park	331	66.2%	Parking Lot	169	33.8%
10	Hostel/Dormitory	500	Hostel	415	83%	Dormitory	85	17%

The table above shows statistics of students' preference to either British or American English lexical choices. As represented above, 367 (73.4%) defer to the frequent use of "Holiday", while 133 students (26.6%) resort to the frequent use of "Vacation"; 92.6% of the students concede to the usage of "Generator" while an insignificant 7.4% prefers to use "Dynamo"; "Kerosene" is preferably used by 87.4% of students while only 12.6% prefers the British variant "Paraffin"; 398 students (79.6%) prefers the British English lexeme "Biscuits" while 102 (20.4%) prefers the American English variant "Cookies"; 203 students (40.6%) use the British word "Booth" while 297 students (59.4%) subscribe to the American variant "Kiosk"; the American word "Elevator" is more often used than the British variant "Lift", as the latter is used by 162 students (32.4%) while 338 students (67.6%) use the former; "Expressway" is more often used by 442 students (88.4%) while the British variants is sparingly used only 58 students (11.6%); a whooping number of 434 students (86.8%) defer to the frequent use of "University" while only 67 students (13.2%) use the American variant "College"; 169 students (33.8%) use the American lexeme "Parking Lot" while a superseding 331 number of students (66.2%) defer to the use of the British variant "Car Park"; an overwhelming 415 students (83%) prefer the use of "Hostel" to the American



variant “Dormitory” which is more often used by only 85 population of the students (17%).

Table 2: Spelling patterns in British, American and Nigerian English

Item	Potent Score	British English			American English		
		Item	Freq	%	Item	Freq	%
1 Favour/Favor	500	Favour	406	81.2 %	Favor	94	18.8%
2 Fulfilment/Fulfillment	500	Fulfilment	257	51.4 %	Fulfillment	243	48.6%
3 Programme/Program	500	Programme	324	64.8 %	Program	176	35.2%
4 Encyclopaedia/Encyclopedia	500	Encyclopaedia	203	40.6 %	Encyclopedia	297	59.4%
5 Centre/Center	500	Centre	216	43.2 %	Center	284	56.8%
6 Criticise/Criticize	500	Criticise	121	24.2 %	Criticize	379	75.8%
7 Dialogue/Dialog	500	Dialogue	489	97.8 %	Dialog	11	2.2%

Furthermore, table 2 above details the slight disparity in the British and American English spelling conventions, and the statistics of L2 users’ subscription to them. On the “-our/-or” disparity, 406 students (81.2%) concede to preference of “Favour” while the American variant “Favor” is used by only 94 students (18.8%); on the “-l/-ll” discrepancy, 257 students (51.4%) subscribe to “Fulfilment” spelling style while the American variant “Fulfillment” is preferred by 243 students (48.6%); the British spelling of “Programme” is more often used by 324 students (64.8%) while 176 students (35.2%) prefer “Program”; “Encyclopedia” is more written by 203 students (40.6%) while the American variant “Encyclopedia” is preferred by a superseding 297 students (59.4%); the British spelling style “Centre” is less preferred compared to the American version “Center”, as 216 students (43.2%) defer to the former and 284 students (56.8%) defer to the latter; 121 students (24.2%) subscribe to the British spelling convention of the word “criticise” while the American variant “criticize” is more often used by 379 students (75.8%); a whooping population of 489 students



(97.8%) defer to the British spelling style of “Dialogue” while an insignificant 2.2% of the students’ population preferably use “Dialog”.

Table 3: Lexical patterns in British, American and Nigerian English

	Item	Potential Score	British English			American English			Nigerian English		
			Item	Freq	%	Item	Freq	%	Item	Freq	%
1	Torch / Flashlight/Torchlight	500	Torch	247	49.4 %	Flashlight	118	23.6 %	Torchlight	135	27 %
2	Knickers/ Shorts/ Short-kicker	500	Knickers	162	32.4 %	Shorts	270	54 %	Short-kicker	68	13.6 %
3	Salon / Barbershop/ Barbing Salon	500	Salon	262	52.4 %	Barbershop	67	13.4 %	Barbing Salon	171	34.2 %
Total		1500									



Table 3 above shows statistical evidence of students' use of the British, American and Nigerian English lexical conventions. As represented above, 247 students (49.4%) subscribe to the use of the British lexeme "Torch", 118 students (23.6%) prefer the American variant "Flashlight", while 135 students (27%) concede to the use of the Nigerian English lexeme "Torchlight". Also, "Knickers" is preferred by 162 students (32.4%), a superseding population of 270 students (54%) subscribe to the American version "Shorts" while only 68 students (13.6%) frequently use the Nigerian English version "Short-Knicker". Lastly, the table shows that 262 students (52.4%) subscribe to the use of "Salon", 171 students (34.2%) subscribe to the Nigerian English form "Barbing Salon", while only 67 students (13.4%) prefer to use the American English form "Barbershop".

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis above provides statistics of sampled students' response to the use of British, American and Nigerian English lexical choices and spelling conventions. In table 1, of the ten test items administered to the respondents, six British English word variants (*holiday, generator, biscuits, university, carpark, hostel*) are most often used while the other four American English lexemes (*kerosene, kiosk, elevator, expressway*) amass high statistical usage by students. This suggests that although the American English lexical convention has been mixed with the British version, a large amount of the respondents still understand and use the British English forms.

Also, seven test items were selected to evaluate the students' preference of the British English or the American English spelling convention. Analysis shows that of the seven test items administered to the students, the respondents prefer the British English spelling style of four (*favour, fulfilment, programme, dialogue*) test items while the preference of the American English style dominate other three test items (*center, criticize, encyclopedia*).

Again, this shows that majority of the respondents mainly resort to the British English spelling convention despite being embattled with the intrusion of the American English spelling style. Furthermore, having established that the Nigerian English lexical choices evolved through lexical blending or clipping of the British and American English, statistics of respondents' performance reveal the extent at which these forms are used among selected university undergraduates. Statistics show the rampant use of "Torch" (BrE), "Salon" (BrE), and "Shorts" (AmrE). Arising from the above, it can be inferred that to a greater



extent, the use of the American English and Nigerian English lexical and spelling conventions have not totally eroded or overwhelmed the expected British English usage.

• **Recommendations**

In light of the prevalent mixture of British and American English, as well as the emergence of Nigerian English, there is a need to fulfill a pedagogic purpose of entrenching and stabilising a variant, either British, American, or Nigerian English variant, among Nigerian users of English, and also maintaining consistency in usage. Therefore, the following recommendations are put forward :

- That university undergraduates of English should be wholly given to use the standard and recognised British English lexical and spelling convention. However, since American English is regarded as standard, Nigerian users of English can also master the American English style, and use it wholesomely without mixing other varieties.
- students should be encouraged to make use of their dictionaries to learn more about the appropriate use of lexicon, proper spelling of words, and mastery of correct form words of pronunciation.
- The English language teachers should be encouraged to attend workshops and trainings that bring the current trend in English teaching. This could help to achieve consistency in the use of a variant.



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Appendix

British	American	British	American
biscuit (sweetened)	cookies (plain)	sceptic	skeptic
scone	biscuit	trousers	pants
petrol	gas	dust bin	garbage can
lift	elevator	boot	trunk
flask	thermos	cooker	stove
lorry	truck	flyover	overpass
bonnet	hood	windscreen	windshield
sitting room	living room	headlamp	headlight
dual carriageway	divided highway	vest	undershirt
organise	organize	patronise	patronize
curriculum vitae (CV)	résumé	Holiday	Vacation
Flyover	Overpass	Draught	Draft
Aerial	Antenna	Solicitor	Lawyer
Trouser	Pant	Lorry	Truck

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Authors' Biodata

Julianah Akindele is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies of Osun State University, Osogbo. Her academic interest focus on the use of spoken language to investigate societal issues and L2 speech perception,



production, comprehension, and intelligibility challenges. This has hugely influenced her interest as an English Phonologist and Applied Linguist and has consistently guided her academic pursuits as well as professional accomplishments. To this end, she has published many academic articles in both local and international journals, which directly interrogate and proffer solutions in these areas. Her Ph.D. thesis entitled: *Duration as a Determining Factor in Educated Edo English Rhythm Description* affirms my academic interest and pursuit along the above-mentioned lines. Julianah Akindele is an administrator per excellence; this is evident in the various administrative positions she occupied in the past and till date. These positions include; Examination Officer, Sub-Dean Students Affairs College of Humanities and Culture UNIOSUN, Acting Head of Department, English and Literary Studies, and currently Acting Dean of Students' Affairs Unit of Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria, etc.

Victor Fabunmi is a Postgraduate student in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and International Studies and a Master of Arts Degree in English (Language) from Osun State University. His academic interest focus is on Applied and Forensic Phonology. He is a committed and highly proactive researcher who is always ready to take up challenges and get positive results.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.

Ethical approval

This research did not require any ethical approval.

