




Evolution and Implications of Contemporary Lexico-Semantic Trends in Nigerian English Language

Nwagbara Blessing Chinelo 
Delta State University, Abraka- Nigeria
blessingnwagbara39@gmail.com

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Abstract: *The Nigerian English variety exists to adapt to the linguistic context of Nigeria, serving as a dynamic means of communication that reflects cultural, social, and historical influences. This paper engages readers in an enaging study that explores current trends in Nigerian English through the Ethnomethodology of Communication approach. Although, many scholars have established the existence of Nigerian English as a recognised variety, few studies have delved into its recent developments to assess how far it has evolved. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining the latest patterns emerging within Nigerian English and identifying the key factors driving its transformation. A central focus of this research is the spoken words of random Nigerian graduates, which serve as a case study for understanding the practical applications of Nigerian English. Findings indicate that Nigerian English has moved beyond the simple transfer and accommodation of indigenous lexical features in English—though this remains a significant aspect. More notably, Nigerian English has become a tool for redefining meanings, encapsulating societal attitudes, and addressing intrinsic linguistic needs. It reflects how Nigerians perceive and express their thoughts on various phenomena while providing a means for cultural identity within a globalized world. As Nigerian English continues to evolve, its role in shaping linguistic trends and communication patterns remains significant; highlighting the interplay between language, culture, and expression in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Evolution, Nigerian English, Contemporary Trends, Ethnomethodology of Communication*

1. Introduction

The language of a people is often a mark of identification; it is a major determinant of culture. Therefore, the Nigerian variety of English is an identity marker for Nigerians who are born and bred in Nigeria. Just like every other language, it has its principles and parameters. Kachru (1982) in Okoh (2006) classifies Nigerian English as belonging to the outer circle because it has been influenced by colonialism and nativised by Nigerians.

The accounts of Tamunobelem (2005), Taiwo (2013) and Okoh (2006) imply that before the Nigerian variety of English (henceforth abbreviated as NE). The English Language was solely foreign language, a property of the British. These aforementioned account that the British had arrived Nigeria in the mid sixteenth century only for trade and religious motives initially. Subsequently, especially after the Berlin conference, in 1884 and the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, there was need to institutionalise English for easy interaction, to aid indirect rule and to propagate Christianity. English therefore became a veritable means of interaction, not only between the colonialists and Nigerians but, amongst Nigerians who had prior to this time shared a linguistic landscape with over two hundred and fifty languages.

It was necessary for schools to be established in order to have an organised and monitored form of language learning. English thus became the language of instruction in schools with a curriculum that emphasised dictation, grammar, reading and comprehension. Subsequently, besides the aim of just being enlightened, the knowledge of English became a prerequisite for those who were interested in careers such as law, politics, medicine, science, teaching, banking and finance and other professional areas. It thus moved from becoming instrumental for communication to being an integrative tool for accommodating citizens who needed to align with growing areas of the society especially in politics, science and technology. In fact, the ability to speak comprehensively and grandiloquently especially with highfalutin lexis was considered one of the hallmarks, identities and proofs of an elitist individual.

The English Language was not self-sufficient to account for all aspects of the Nigerian culture especially those that defined Nigerian experiences such as proverbs, clothing, food, festivals, housing and kinship (especially in polygamy, possibly polyandry). It was difficult to showcase the meaning import of the



aforementioned hence, there began an inevitable transfer of phonological, lexico-semantic, syntactic and discursive features of Nigerianness to English which resulted in the Nigerian variety of English. Nigerianness in this study are those idiosyncrasies peculiar to the Nigerian people, it encompasses both culture and language. In his report, Adegbija (1989) in Obasi (2002) explains that the transfer of indigenous terms to English happens when the meaning of conceived ideas is not readily available to the speaker in English. Hence, the Nigerian variety of English is firstly, a variety of English that has its origin in Nigeria.

Consequently, there are parameters for adjudging the Nigerian variety of English. Some instances are demonstrated in Brosnaham (1958), Banjo (1970), Awonusi (1987) and Bambose (1982). In their various studies, education, local acceptability, and international intelligibility, the evolution of varieties, and social placement are viable parameters for describing the Nigerian variety of English. This paper examines current lexico-semantic trends in Nigerian English, it describes how it is currently adopted in the Nigerian linguistic setting.

2. Objectives of the Study

The aims and objectives of this study are geared towards:

- Adopting a critique perspective in the examination of some definitions of NE.
- Indebtly analysing some of the current idiosyncrasies and trends in the NE.
- Discussing the implication of NE on the mutual intelligibility among Nigerians and international communities based on the findings of this study

3. Statement of the Problem

No fewer than twelve academic publications argue that NE exists. The review of Ogunjobi and Akindutire (2020), Obasi (2022), Ndiribe (2023), Kaan et al (2013), and Adebija (1989) conclude that NE is a variant of English that has emerged to satisfy the linguistic needs of the Nigerian people. However, Ogunjobi and Akindutire (2020) dismiss the idea of international intelligibility as a means of determining standard NE with a proposition that NE is meant for Nigerians alone. They suppose that no variant should be termed erroneous even in schools. Okurinmeta (2014) further adds that the endonormative model (standard NE) should be used to adjudge performances in certificate examinations. Although their arguments emphasise the salient need for standardisation, however, little attention has been focused on examining the current trends in NE. This paper



considers and exposes these trends and discusses how they influence mutual intelligibility at both the intra- and international linguistic landscape. It also discusses the implications of these present trends in adjuging Standard Nigerian English.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication model (the EC), propounded in 1962. This theory proposes that the norms and beliefs of individuals and communities define the style and meaning of language. Noy (2017) states that the EC is an anthropological approach that is empirical and comparative to showcase diversity in human communicative activities and contexts. It therefore arrives at similarities between the contexts. In other words, in EC, there is an emphasis on heterogeneity that emerges from either a longitudinal or cross-sectional study of different cultures, societies, and actual contexts and events predominantly on cultural contexts with an eye towards cross-cultural comparison.

By implication, the EC does not isolate language study to grammatical units but studies language with culture. It reviews diverse contexts of language use to discover their similarities. It considers how, when, and by whom discourse is initiated, sustained, and reproduced with a focus on new systems of exchange practices. Noy (2017) outlines four concepts as comprising the core of EC: communication events, means of communication, speech or communication economy, and speech community. All these concepts are encapsulated in a conceptual apparatus called SPEAKING.

S- setting/scene	P- participants	E- ends	A- act
sequence	K- key- tone and manner	I- instrumentalities/medium	
N- norms of interaction	G- genre- the type of speech and context		

By implication, the EC model is ideal for this study because this paper studies language not only in cultural contexts but with an eye on cross-cultural comparison to demonstrate that Nigerian English is evolving.

5. Literature Review

The introductory part of this paper highlights NE as a variant of English. Okoh (2006, p. 66) defines it as "that form of English domesticated by Nigerians' intra- and international communicative needs". however, he criticises this definition by stating that not every Nigerian can domesticate English. Besides, he wonders about the prerogatives by which standard NE is determined. He wonders if it is that variant spoken by intellectuals, the ruling class or the government. It is



important to note that at the time of this definition, his awareness may not have been drawn to the fact that foreigners who may have lived in Nigeria over time may have adopted the NE to be well understood, especially at events and at marketplaces. Their adaptation would be necessary for incorporation and identification, especially for those who want to market their products in Nigeria. NE therefore is not for Nigerians alone, it accommodates foreigners who may want to identify with the Nigerian people.

Ndiribe (2023) perceives NE as a brand of English constantly evolving so that meaning is not lost. This variety does not only encapsulate the nuances of Nigerian culture but demonstrates discrepancies in spellings (British and American brands), grammatical alternations manifesting in regularised malapropisms, misplaced word classes, coinages, acronyms, lexicalisation, and syntactic formations. This definition makes one wonder if NE is like Standard British English. This definition portrays a negative outlook on Nigerian English; however, one can infer that this brand is a constantly redefined brand of English Nigerians have nativised to soothe their linguistic needs.

Nigerian English for Ogunji and Onuoha (2022, p. 218) is "a variety used by Nigerians to communicate across various socio-cultural boundaries." They fail to recognise that NE has evolved past being used as a medium of communication alone, as Pidgin serves that purpose, especially across all social strata.

After due consideration of the historical facets of the NE, Ogunjobi and Akintudire (2020, p. 4) agree that NE refers to the "lexicon of English used by Nigerians to reflect the peculiarities of regional languages." This may seem like an impeccable definition, but one may wonder about the concept of "regional languages". Does this mean that NE is not used between or amongst Nigerians who may have found themselves in other parts of the world? Could there be a conscious attempt to reflect Nigerian peculiarities? Can we infer that for every NE spoken, there are always features of regional languages? How many regional languages are enough to qualify NE?

In all these definitions, it can be inferred that NE is a variant of English that demonstrates linguistic features of Nigerianness. These linguistic properties could be phonological, semantic, or syntactic. What then is Nigerianness? They are features peculiar to Nigerian context, they are either psychological or physical. They largely influence the feelings and attitude of Nigerians towards language use.

This is a variety Ndiribe (2023) describes as constantly evolving to accommodate so that meaning is not lost. Nigerian English could therefore be perceived as a variety of English that preserves the linguistic properties of the



Nigerian society. This shows the propensity for the evolving nature of Nigerian English.

In Okoh (2006), we see a lot of debate on how to determine Standard Nigerian English, Brosnaham (1985), Banjo (1971), Williams (1981), Jibril (1979) etc describe parameters for establishing NE. These aforementioned writers have discussed these parameters categorically based on the following headings:

- mother tongue interference and linguistic affiliation;
- level of educational attainment;
- socio-economic class membership;
- sociological criteria of social acceptability and international intelligibility;
- linguistic criterion of adherence to the syntax, semantics and phonology of world standard English.

Okoh (2006, p. 88)

5.1 The Concept of Nigerian English

Bamgbose (1982) is given prominence in this study because he considers the evolution of Nigerian English in his parameters and classification. Ekpe (2010) states that Bamgbose's first variety is Contact Language. It was used in the late 70s. An instance of the contact language is the Broken English as seen in Anter Duke's Diary of Events in Calabar between 1785 and 1788:

soon after I see my men was liv with him to canow com
up and tell me Enyong people's tak my canow way for
landing, so, I Run and Go Down for landing I find no canow

In his study, Ekpe (2010) cites pidgin as another contact language as seen in King Jaja of Opobo's (1824) diary which reads:

suppose my fader, or my fader fader come up from ground
and peak me why English man do dat, I no sabby tell why

In the television show called New Masquerade, Ken Saro Wiwa's Sozaboy, Broken English is used as Ekpe explains in his work. Many academics would argue that Pidgin is a language of its own, however most lexico-semantic properties inherent in it are features of NE. It could be inferred that at the initial stage, Nigerians consciously tried to be proficient in English. There was this



consciousness and seamless effort by Nigerians to attain some significant level of proficiency in both spoken and written English, Pidgin was a starting point; a contact point. At this juncture it is important to state that the Portuguese language and the Nigerian indigenous languages brought about Pidgin. Currently in the 21st century NE, instances of Pidgin are vividly eminent, these are some of the things our findings shall reveal.

Bambose's second variety is Victorian English. A 19th century "Negro English" associated with professionals, educators, and missionaries who had just returned from Brazil, America, and West India, and later Sierre Leone and Liberia. A variety characterised by frequent quotations and allusions to classics and other displays of learning. Ekpe cites the Observer Newspaper that reads:

and I hope he will not put restrain on his pen but will use it ad libitum
..unpalatable but undeniable..."

This kind of variety was used to demonstrate learnedness or excellent language proficiency. Those who used this variety were not so many. Simply put, this variety was a show-off variety.

The third is School English (SE). School English is the predominant variety, according to Ekpe (2010), and all three strands contribute to what today is called Standard Nigerian English. Although he does not further expatiate on this, it could be inferred that this variety was what was taught in schools, especially by British teachers, especially at the secondary level. It mirrors the Standard British English and reduces much influence from the Nigerian linguistic landscape. Hence some features of Nigerianness were perceived as erroneous and termed Bad English. Ekpe (2010) fails to mention that there was an infusion of Nigerian teachers in schools subsequently after Nigeria's Independence in 1960. Many British teachers had to leave and Nigerians who had been taught in English and attained a level of qualification had to take over from where the British teachers had left off. Surely there was the inclusion of Nigerianness in the classroom setting even up till this day.

5.2 The Spice of Nigerian English

There are diverse works that highlight the features of the NE; for review, this study extracts some features from Okoh (2006). Bemgbose's Classification of Nigerian English

Nigerian English (NE)

Escort/follow
escort in NE

Standard English (SE)

accompany - to accompany someone is to "follow or



To wonder	to be surprised
Branch	to call at one's way
To take in	to conceive a baby, become pregnant
Lesson	Private tuition
Armies	Soldiers
Equipments	Equipment

- **Question Tags:** The NE question tags are fixed, mostly characterised by
Isn't it?

NE: They went to the market, isn't it?

SE: They went to the market, didn't they?

- **General disregard for determiners, articles, and noun markers**

NE: There is dog in that environment.

NE: Give me money

(command)

SE: There is a dog in that environment.

SE: Please give me (some)

money

Use of two determiners of the same class in NE

NE: This my friend (...)

SE: This friend of mine (...)

- **Area of transitivity and taking objects**

NE: They sang

SE: They sang a song.

- *Reflexives*

NE: Mary and Edet love themselves.

SE: Mary and Edet love each other.

- *Number*

NE: Let us rise as the couples come in.

SE: Let us rise as the couple comes in.

- *Loan words from Indigenous Languages*

Titles: Alaaafin, Alhaji, Hajia, Oba, Obi, Oga

Items of clothing: Agbada, danchiki

Food: Amala, tuwo, eko, dodo

Drinks: Ogogoro, burukutu, kaikai



See Okoh (2006, pp. 142-146)

6. Method and Data Collection

Data were sourced from speeches of random Nigerian graduates. Some participants were informed about the recording after the conversation was done because the researcher wanted the participants to be as natural as possible. Nigerian graduates were considered ideal for this study because they are expected to have a higher level of proficiency in use the of English. Some data were retrieved from on air radio presenters, entrepreneurs, bankers, teachers and analysed using the ethnography of communication SPEAKING model to discover and analyse current trends of the 21st century NE and how they influence the mutual intelligibility of intra- and international communities.

7. Data Presentation and Analysis

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1a. Personally, I am not against those who want to Japa.

1b. Personally, I am not against those who want to relocate.

Setting: Formal - Radio Station

Participants: Presenters

Ends: Buttress a point about those travelling out of the country

Key: Disappointment

Instrumentalities: Spoken words

Norms: 2 or more way participation

Genre: Literal

Source of Data: Inspirational Breakfast Show at 8:10am (Crown 89.9fm)

2a. I will revert shortly.

2b. I will reply/respond shortly.

Setting: Formal - Online Transaction



Participants: Entrepreneurs / government officials

Ends: Assurance of response

Key: Indifference

Instrumentalities: Written words

Norms: Two way interaction

Genre: Literal

Source: Online conversation between an entrepreneur and a government official

3a. Her dowry was paid without negotiation.

3b. Her bride-price was paid without negotiation.

Setting: Semi-formal - Wedding

Participants: Brides-maids

Ends: Expression of satisfaction

Key: Excitement

Instrumentalities: Spoken words

Norms of Interaction: Two or more way interaction

Genre: Literal

Source: Wedding Ceremony

4a. Sumptuous meal

4b. Scrumptious meal

Setting: Semi-formal - Thanksgiving party

Participants: Office guests

End: Complement the chef

Genre: Literal

Source: Outdoor Wedding Party

5a. Several/ Severally

Setting: School

Participants: Teacher/student

End: Buttress a point

Key: Anger

Instruments: Spoken words

Norms of Interaction: Two way (teacher - students)

Genre: Literal

Source: Classroom Setting

6a. Sister from another mother

6b. Bosom friend



Setting: Formal/informal
Participants: Friends - close group
Ends: Show accolade
Key: Interest
Instrument(s): Spoken words
Norms: Two way (Speaker - audience)
Genre: Literarily

Source : Introduction at birthday party

7a. Please, pay the woman her money now.

7a. (i) She stopped me from leaving, I now insulted her.

7b. The Nigerian government borrowed to import foreign vehicles for the

National Assembly members now claim the money was to finance a budget for infrastructure.

Section "a" introduces current lexico-semantic trends in Nigerian English and "b" shows their alternative/previous usage. Both are placed for a possible contrastive study and to demonstrate their similarities as seen in the Ethnomethodology of Communication theory.

1a and 1b show the discrepancies in the choice of lexis overtime. 1a shows the influx of Pidgin in the use of English; a feature taking dominance in the speech of Nigerian graduates. The influx of japa is a recent term in Pidgin that evolved due to the dwindling economy, incessant corrupt practices, insecurity problems in the nation. Factors that can be managed if the right leaders are voted and if sentiments are set aside. The youths know there are ways out of the untold hardships but corrupt politicians would not permit so japa is a term used to say they want to escape to a foreign nation. The English lexicon supposedly, does not provide an adequate term to define that. It is a term used to say I'm going to seek greener pasture or I'm seeking better opportunities; moving away from the turmoils of Nigeria; found a means of escape. 1b is used by the wealthy class while the aforementioned is used by those in the lower and middle classes. Those who use relocate plainly have nothing to run from especially because they are comfortable especially financially. They just want a change of environment hence NE has made provision for the desired and effectual meaning that SE cannot account for.

According to Oxford (2023), to revert is to change/convert/reverse/return to a previous state however, in Indian English to revert is to respond or reply someone. Nigerians have currently adopted the Indian meaning in their



vocabulary, the term revert is to respond/reply/retort/to get back to. This kind of usage is common among government officials and formal email replies. This usage is used to show more formality and redefinition of meaning. 2b option was common in the past and used at different levels of the society and is still in use today. However, revert shows certainty and formality.

In 3a, dowry is seen as a property or money paid by the bride's family to the groom and his family at the time of marriage. Google defines it as "an amount of property or money brought by the bride to her husband on the day of their marriage." In Nigeria today, both dowry and bride price are considered the same in meaning. The meaning has been redefined and conceptualised as the money a groom and his family pays to the bride's family on the day of marriage because it is not in our culture to pay anything to the man's family. NE therefore redefines meaning to soothe their linguistic needs. In some cases, due to the need for word economy, dowry is preferred over bride price.

Sumptuous in NE is a qualification for a rather delicious meal. Supposedly, due to the similarity in both terms sumptuous and scrumptious, both lexical items are interchanged. This choice among Nigerians can be based on ignorance or choice. The aforementioned is easier to pronounce.

The term Bogus is a term used to depict fake, ingenuity or falsehood. In the Nigerian linguistic landscape, it is used to qualify the size of an object; one which is gigantic. This insight is brought about due to the sound of the word. Hence its meaning has been redefined due to the cultural background in Nigeria.

Severally is a term used by Nigerian graduates to depict repetition/reoccurrence. Although SE sees it as separateness. This redefinition may have been incorporated in the English dictionary currently. We can distinctively say that Nigerian English has evolved to a point where it can redefine meaning to soothe its context and be accommodated among World Englishes.

Another interesting term is brother (sister)-from another mother. A term used both formally and informally especially during introductions at events to depict a close relationship with a bosom friend. This kind of friend is often said to play the role of a brother or sister and as such is seen to be more than a bosom friend/best friend/close friend (terms these users do not consider definitive enough to soothe their linguistic needs). Hence there are innovations of words.

Please pay the woman now often has an intonation associated with both exhaustion and command. This meaning could be likened to expressions such as where are you now? What sort of a thing is this now? I am here now. Now is used by Nigerians especially at the end of a sentence or clause to demonstrate a feeling of restlessness.



In 7a (i), now introduces a subsequent action. In some instances, now is used to introduce a relative clause and serve as conjunctions. The instances below help to reveal them:

The Nigerian government borrowed to import foreign vehicles for the National Assembly members now they claim the money was to finance a budget for infrastructure.

The Nigerian government borrowed to import foreign vehicles for the National Assembly members yet they claim the money was to finance a budget for infrastructure.

In this instance, the speaker does not intend to talk about the present with the use of now. It is used to accuse or show a juxtaposition between what the government has said and what they have done. This instance shows that now is a word class to join in two clauses.

8. Conclusion and Findings

The data analysed reveal through Ethnomethodology of Communication (SPEAKING) that NE is a customised English used to meet the linguistic needs of the Nigerian people. Unlike before NE has evolved beyond just the transfer of Mother Tongue languages to English because users could not find suitable words or expressions. Currently, it is highly innovative and intentional; in other words, users include indigenous languages or Pidgin to encapsulate emotions or feelings and redefine or extend meaning. These users are capable of using Standard British English but, the need for Nigerianness makes them adopt Nigerian English. Aside from this, NE is now a home for other varieties of English as seen in REVERT. Aside from this studies also show the influx of intonations, and orthography belonging to other countries. NE is now a variety that accommodates other varieties. In addition, NE redefines meaning and some of the factors that determine how meaning is redefined include; the setting where discourse takes place, the participants involved in the discourse, the psychological end goal, the key reflective in tone, the norm of interaction and the genre which highly influences meaning redefinition. In spoken words, there is a lot of flexibility as well as on social media, this high level of flexibility is easily depictable.

Meaning redefinition in current Nigerian English are as a result of:

- The inability of English to account for certain meaning import as in *japa*.
- The misplacement of word meaning as in *sumptuous* and *scrumptious*; *severally* / *several* as a result of inadequate learning of terms.



- the need for word economy as seen in bride price/dowry, Nigerian would prefer the easiest way to say something hence they have adopted other world Englishes to better express their linguistic needs.
- the transfer of meaning based on sounds as in the indigenous languages of Nigeria to the English Language.

The innovation (redefinition of meaning), the transfer of pidgin to English and the choice of word economy have different implications on the international communities where English is the native language especially. The misplacement of long lexical items (wrong terms) for short ones distorts meaning. Aside from distorting meaning, it depicts a level of low proficiency in the mastery of English. This is especially because the alternative uses are often similar in either pronunciation or meaning. In such situations, one cannot see any Nigerianness in failing to learn words that are appropriate for discourse situations hence this may present Nigerians as people who are still not advanced learners of Standard British English. As in the case of the transfer of pidgin, we see English as not being able to house the meaning import of certain attitudes of Nigerians hence the transfer. The implication of this is that Nigerians attach emotions to certain words as seen in japa. NE therefore still exhibits features of Pidgin like in the time of Contact Language. In the term dowry, for instance, we see that Nigerian English is accommodating in nature. The transfer of Pidgin and the changes in meaning would be what the international communities may try to grapple with.

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Author Biodata

Nwagbara Blessing Chinelo currently lectures at Michael and Cecilia Ibru University, specializing in English. As a dedicated academic, she teaches a range of courses, including Introduction to Poetry, Introduction to Nigerian Literature, General Studies in English Language, Creative Writing, Introduction to Grammar, and Composition. Her students primarily comprise 100 and 200-level undergraduates, whom she guides in developing strong literary and linguistic foundations. Beyond her lecturing responsibilities, she actively engages in academic research and publications. Her scholarly contributions include a publication in the International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, titled "Code-Switching and Code-Mixing as Stylistic Devices in Selected Gospel Songs of Mercy Chinwo", published in December 2021. She actively engages in academic research and publications. Her commitment to intellectual discourse extends to ongoing research, with several manuscripts currently under review in reputable academic journals.

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Informed consent

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