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The Issue of 'Standard' in Nigerian English: A Dual Linguistic Dilemma for Nigerian Second Language (L2) Users

David Peter Nsungo
Department of English
University of Uyo
Email: peterdavidnsungo@gmail.com
GSM: 08068865891

Abstract

The classification of Nigerian English into 'standard' and 'non-standard' varieties based on the level or quality of education of its users has, like many other issues in Nigerian English, and the more general issues of 'standards' in the English language, defied any generally accepted stance amongst scholars and practitioners in the Nigerian English project. It has not enjoyed any explanatory ease and adequacy either by any of the scholars. Premised on the above, therefore, this paper examined the basis for such taxonomy, in order to show how realistic and helpful or otherwise, the differentiation is, and how faithful or otherwise, the users in each variety are to their respective categories. Data were drawn from the works of various NE school are who have made attempts at classification of Nigerian English. The different categorizations were reviewed, and features of each variety interrogated based on Howard Gile's communication accommodation theory (CAT). The theory emphasizes, among other things, the need for people to minimize the social difference between them and others with whom they interact. This can be achieved by shifting their own speech characteristics or adapting to the other person's communication behaviours while interacting. It was discovered, among other things, that baring any intentional efforts or special study (Kartzner2002, p.105), users of the 'educated', 'sophisticated' or 'standard' variety can perfectly understand the speech of those classified under the 'non-standard' variety. The paper thus concludes that though, in principle, it may be worthwhile to make such distinctions; in reality, however, the practice seems unnatural and unrealistic. It constitutes a dilemma for most NE users and a distraction from the overall quest for the authentication of the legitimacy of Nigerian English. Moreover, it works against the quest for the dislodgement of the native speakers' traditional prerogative in determining what is intelligible and/or acceptable and what is not in the speech of non-native users in non-native environment.

Keywords: Nigerian English, Standard, Second Language (L2), Non-native, Communication accommodation.

Introduction

English language, despite its origin in the British Isles (Eka 2005, p. 5) has, in the course of the years, come to assume the status of a world - a language, spoken (used) with different varieties and levels of proficiency by different categories of speakers in different regions/cultures of the world. It is spoken by well over four hundred million native speakers, with roughly about the same number of people using it as a second language (L2) (Barber1993, p.236). Going by its spread of and long period of usage in many cultures, it is normal to expect the English language to develop inter and intracultural varieties and levels of usage. As examined separately in Egbe (2004, p.320),Egwuogu (2004, p.105) in the emergence of intracultural varieties, largely determined by level of education in the language, time of exposure to it as well as other environmental factors, has led to the classification of English in most L2 communities into 'standard' and 'non-standard'.

But the issue of standard in the English language is relative as the concept has defied any universally-accepted definition or description. Due to the controversy surrounding the term, many scholars have carefully avoided being drawn into the argument on the issue of 'standard' and non-standard' English. However, those who have attempted a definition or description of it largely reflect sentiments in the process, since, as noted in Quirk and Greenbaum (1973,p.158), there is no official or central regulating body defining what is standard and what is not. The difficulty, in describing what constitutes 'a standard', arises from the recognition of English as a world language, spoken with variations and modifications and for different purposes in many regions of the world.

McArthur (1992) observes that, "this widely used term... resists any easy definition, but it is used as if most educated people nonetheless know precisely what it refers to" (p.52).For some of those people, he argues, standard English (SE) is a synonym for good or correct English usage. Others, he maintains, use the term to refer to a specific geographical dialect of English or a dialect [for instance the Received Pronunciation] favoured by the most powerful and prestigious social group.

In line with the view of 'standard' English as good or correct English usage, it is seen in Ogu (1992, p.18), as, "the authoritative and correct usage of the language as against the dialectal varieties". To Watts & Bex, standard English [often shortened to SE within linguistic circles], refers to whatever form of the English language that is accepted as a national norm in an Anglophone country. It encompasses grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

In the British Isles, particularly in England and Wales, the authors maintain, it is often associated with the Received Pronunciation" accent (1999, p.52).

Although generally seen as the most acceptable form or version of the language, the spoken standards are however observed to be looser than their written counterparts; they are more flexible in accepting new grammatical forms and vocabulary. Classified under variety of English according to education and social standing (status), Quirk and Greenbaum comment

thus on standard English:

> ...by reason of the fact that educated English [BBC English] is accorded implicit social and political sanction, it comes to be referred to as standard, and provided we remember that this does not mean an English that has been formally standardized by official action, as weights and measures are standardized, then the term is useful and appropriate (1973, p.3).

What Quirk and Greenbaum's comment above implies is that there is actually nouniversally acceptable form of the language known as 'standard', but that it is a term fashioned by few scholars to favour the variety used by a specific social and political class. They, however, observe that although standard English is the variety used by most educated speakers of the language in different parts of the world, yet the standard in one community may be slightly diferent from that in another (1973, p.4). Thus, the scholars have identified some national(regional) standards such as standard British English (SBE), Standard American English(SAE), Standard Australian English, among others. This is where standard or educated Nigerian spoken English (ENE), described in Eka (2000, p. 86-87) as "a variety that shows evidence of appropriate segmental and non-segmental distinctions, and can be understood and accepted nationally and internationally", finds relevance. Commenting on Standard English from a historical perspective, Ogbuehi (2001) observes that over the centuries, English, which was originally the language of the Angels, Saxons and Jutes, has undergone changes in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation to become what is known as British English (BrE), which is the 'standard', also called Queen's English (pp.51-52).

Despite the sentiments expressed by these scholars, whose views have been reviewed so far; and in spite of Ogbuehi's enticing comments about British and BBC English respectively as the acceptable standard, Crowley in the title, "What Standard English is Not", warns that:

(i) 'Standard English' cannot be defined or described in terms such as the best English' or 'Literary English', or 'Oxford English' or 'BBC English';
(ii) It is not defined by reference to the usage of any particular group of English users, and especially not by reference to a social class -Standard English is not 'upper class English', and it is encountered across the whole social spectrum, though not necessarily in equivalent use by all members of all classes;
(iii) it is not statistically the most frequently occurring form of English. Standard English here does not mean 'most often heard' (2003, p.16).

As difficult as it is to reach a consensus on a universally accepted definition and/ordescription of what standard English is globally, so difficulty it is to find a solution to the controversy generated by the concept at the regional level, such as in Nigeria, where varieties differentiation of spoken English has assumed a worrisome dimension. Thus, the debate which began, in Nigeria at least, with Brosnahan's (1958) classification of spoken Nigerian English, goes on and on, without an end in sight.

Theoretical Basis

An analytical model (a theory), according to Clarke (2005) is chosen, based on its appropriacy and relevance. In line with Clarke's lead, Howard Gile's Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), with specific emphasis on the similarity attraction component of the theory will be adopted for this theoretical research on the issue of standards in Nigerian English. Developed by Howard Giles, a professor of communication at the University of California, the theory stresses adjustment in terms of language use in communication. The specific focus of the theory is on the need for people to minimize the social difference or gap between them and others with whom they interact at certain times and in certain contexts. This, Giles maintains, can be done through a downward adjustment in ones vocabulary, or upward activation of one's intelligibility mechanisms. Factors which ensure the accommodation, as noted in Agbedo (2015, p.72) are either verbal or non-verbaladjustments. Verbal adjustments involve the introduction of words with less complex structure or meaning into sentences, in order to accommodate the other participants in the communication process.

Evolved from speech adjustment theory in psychology, CAT elaborates the human tendency to adjust their speech behaviour while interacting with people of either higher or lower social status or educational attainments. The reason behind this behaviour is primarily to minimize the social difference between interactants in a communication event. People, notes Agbedo (2015, p.73), adjust their speech patterns in communication activities to get approval and set positive self-image before co-participants in the communication events. There are two types of accommodation process associated with this theory: convergence and divergence. In convergence, which is the focus of this paper, the speaker tends to adapt the listener's communication characteristics in order to minimize the social difference or communication gap.

Also referred to as interpersonal accommodation theory, CAT, Scollon says, has spring from the awareness that speakers are not merely incumbents for roles imposed on them by society but rather, inquirers trying to comprehend themselves and others with whom they interact (2001, p.18). As highlighted in its "negotiative" nature therefore, the theory in its similarity attraction component lends itself to the concept of convergence, by which two or more individuals alter or shift their speech to align with those of the parties with whom they interact.

It is based upon the "negotiative" nature of conversations, and the "accommodation of other speakers" (Sauvage, 2002, p. 24) therefore, that the speakers of the sophisticated(standard) and non-sophisticated (non-standard) varieties of Nigerian English can alter their speech characteristics to resemble those of the people they interact with in any speech event. For this to happen, however, there must be sincerity on the part of each party about what is intelligible to them, despite some technical complexities. There should also exist the willingness by participants to descend and ascend the variety ladder when necessary during communication.

The Literature: Varieties Taxonomy in Nigerian English

Long before the question of the legitimacy of Nigerian English (NE) was settled by works of scholars like Banjo (1971), Adesanonye (1973), Adetugbo (1979), Jibril (1982),Jowitt (1991), Ogu (1992), Kachru (1996), Eka (2000), Udofot (2003), and more recently, the publication of "A

Dictionary of Nigerian English slangs", among other scholarly research efforts, the quest for varieties differentiation in Nigerian English had already begun. This varieties differentiation project in NE, which is in line with Oyeleye's (1994) position (cited in Melefa & Odoemenam 2019, p. 159) that "language is not just a single isolated entity which can always be committed to rigid formalization techniques'" began in 1958 with the pioneer work of Brosnahan (see Udofot, 1997).

Apart from Brosnahan (1958), other scholars such as Banjo (1971), Adesanonye (1973), Adekunle (1979), Bamgbose (1982), Jibril (1982), Odumuh (1987), Eka (2000),Udofot (2003, 2007), Egbe (2004), Okoro (2004), Jowitt (2007) among others, have carried out varieties typology of Nigerian English using the criteria of education, occupation, religion, geographical location, style, intelligibility and acceptability of NE, among others considerations. However, in this paper, only few of such differentiations shall be considered in the light of their overall relevance to the issue of standard and non-standard in Nigerian English.

In his pioneering work, Brosnahan, working on English in the Southern part of Nigeria, postulated four varieties of NE based on educational attainment of his subject. The sevarieties, according to Ogu (1992, p.82) are:

(a) The variety spoken by people with no formal education (Pidgin English);
(b) The variety spoken by people with only primary school education;
(c) The third variety, which is spoken by secondary school leavers and is marked by greater fluency but excessive vocabulary; and,
(d) Variety four spoken by people with university or higher education.

Reacting to Brosnahan's classification of NE, Bamgbose (1982) cited in Jowitt (1991, p.38)dismisses Brosnahan's level one (Pidgin English) as a non-variety, and maintains that only levels II-1V are relevant to any analysis on Nigerian English. Here, it is pertinent to note Brosnahan's comment that 'education does not always correlate with opportunity for the use of English'. Making a scholarly input on Brosnahan's research effort, Udofot (2003) notes that Brosnahan's pioneer work made two viable contributions. First, that the level of formal education is one criterion for assessing proficiency in spoken English, because of perceivable standards of linguistic performance often characteristic of certain levels of education. Next, that all things being equal, the standard of oral performance in English improves with exposure to formal education, especially as English is the language of education in Nigeria.

Another differentiation of NE worth serious attention is that done by Adesanoye (1973, 1980) based on written English of Nigerians, as against Banjo's (1973) phonological data. Adesanoye identified three varieties of NE based on educational attainment of the users. Variety 1, according to him, is identified with average primary-school leaver and also with low-grade workers. Variety II, he says, is used by secondary school leavers, many university students including most magistrates and many journalists. His Variety Ill represents the graduate class, with most university lecturers, superior judges, administrators, the more sophisticated authors, among others (see Jowitt 1991, p. 40) using this variety. Adesanoye's variety III may be equated with Eka's 'sophisticated' variety as shall be seen presently.

Here again, there is difficulty in determining Adesanoye's many university students, most magistrates and many journalists and average primary-school leavers'. Jowitt (2007; p.12)also

notes that, 'the categorization of his university students is somewhat confusing', perhaps in the sense that it is not clear whether university students used in his variety II relate to undergraduate or postgraduate students. Thus, the arguments which lead to modifications in the varieties differentiation, continue.

Even so, Adekunle's (1979) categorization of NE into: 1. the near-native speaker, 2.the local colour and 3. The incipient bilingual varieties, has its own shortcomings. On the one hand, it is difficult to determine who the 'well-educated Nigerians' are, that he identifies withv ariety I or the near-native speaker variety. On the other hand, its nearness to the native speaker variety may presuppose a complete detachment from the Nigerian environment in the light of the peculiar socio-cultural milieu of Nigeria where English is a second language.

In the same vein, Eka (2000) examined the varieties of both spoken and written Nigerian English. At one extreme of the source differentiation, is the nonstandard variety, which is associated with beginners, that is, those who are barely educated in the language and have had minimum exposure to it both in school (often primary) and outside. This variety, the author notes, is characterized by unacceptable choice and use of words and structural patterns. It also shows a general departure from national and international standard of acceptability and intelligibility (2000, p.86). At the other end of Eka's classification, is the sophisticated variety also called ambilingual or near-native variety, with display of a general tendency toward national and international acceptability and intelligibility. In other words, the speech and writing of those within this variety are closest to those of the native speakers / users of the language, as shown in Kachru's concentric circles below:

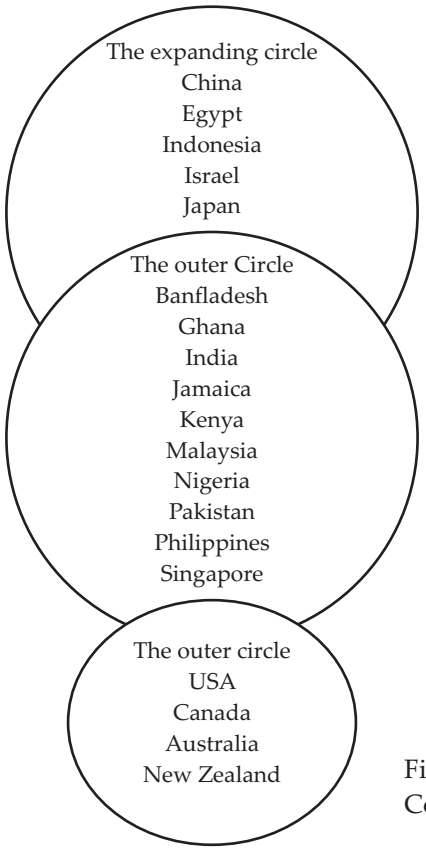

Fig. 1: Kachru' (1996)
Concentric Circles of English

Sandwiched, however, between the two extreme levels in Eka's classification are the basic or general variety which displays appreciable level of maturity in speech and writing, and the standard or educated variety, associated with what he calls university men and women, whose speech and writing can be accepted and understood both nationally and internationally. Eka, however, notes about the sophisticated variety users that they can still be identified as non-native speakers/users in spite of their high level of performance (2000,p.87). What this implies is that no matter the level of education and exposure to the language and no matter what strenuous efforts are exerted to sound native-speaker-like that, in speech at least, the non-native speaker's speech could still be identified as one.

Perhaps, the taxonomy that would be most useful for our study on the issue of standard and non-standard NE, is Udofot's (2003) "A Reclassification" of Banjo's four-variety 'classification' of spoken Nigerian English. Extoling Banjo's classification of NE as the most realistic, Udofok maintains that it is close to present-day realities of spoken English in the Nigerian society based on formal education, where spoken English at times does not correlate with educational status. She notes also that Banjo's classification was a good springboard for recent NE scholars like Bamgbose, Jibril, Jowitt, Eka, Udofot and Ekong. Udofot "reclassified" Banjo's varieties into three: the non-standard "(variety one):variety two (standard) and variety three (sophisticated). Variety one (non-standard) is spoken by primary and some secondary school leavers, university freshmen, holders of NCE and OND certificates as well as some primary school teachers. It is characterized by high incidence of pausing, inability to make vital phonemic distinction, tendency to accent nearly every syllable and preference for falling tone (Udofot 2003, p.18). Variety two (standard) is spoken by third and final year undergraduates of English, university graduates of English, holders of HND and some professionals. This variety, the author says, is marked by the ability of the users to make some vital phonemic distinctions and occasional approximations, reasonably fluent speech, many prominent syllables, preference for unidirectional tones (the fall and the rise).

Variety three (sophisticated) in Udofot's "reclassification", is spoken by university lecturers in English and Linguistics, graduates of English and Humanities, and those who have lived in areas where English is the mother tongue. Its features include ability to make all phonemic distinctions, fluent speech, few extra prominent syllables and flexible use of intonation. Although Banjo's classification as at the time of Udofot's (2003) research was deemed the most acceptable based on the criterion of formal education, yet a major shortcoming of the classification, Udofot observes, was that people without formal education were not included in any of the varieties. More so, variety three (sophisticated) seemed unrealistic without the use of relative terms such as 'most' or 'many', as it is observed that not all lecturers in English and Linguistics, and not all graduate of the Humanities sufficiently display the qualities identified by Udofot.

Moreover, Banjo's classification was silent on whether it is all those who have lived in areas where English is the mother tongue (MT), irrespective of their educational attainment, that could sufficiently display these sophistication in the use of English. It did not also state the minimum or maximum duration of stay in such areas to guarantee the level of proficiency associated with the sophisticated variety. Thus, Udofot suggests, among other things, that those without formal education be included in variety one (non-standard). Again, it was

suggested that it would be more appropriate to say that the sophisticated variety is spoken by most lectures in English, Linguistics and Humanities, in order to make the classification more realistic.

With Udofot's tacit endorsement of further research on the classification of NE, the classificatory complexities and the debate on the issue of standard and non-standard in Nigerian English continues unabated.

Implications of the Classifications on the Issue of Standards

Although not overtly stated by any of the scholars whose works on the varieties of NE have been reviewedso far, yet it follows naturally that the various attempts at classifying English usage by Nigerians along dimensions of educational attainment [especially in the language] and technicalities of usage, has created a gulf between users of the standard, sophisticated and non-standard varieties of NE. Thus the argument on standard and non-standard usage in NE becomes akin to what Bamgbose (1982, p.10) terms "the vexed question of international intelligibility" about which he and scholars such as (Baugh and Cable, Crystal, Cowart, Jenkins, Adetugbo, Okoro, among others), challenged and rejected the traditional judgment method which confers the prerogative on the native speakers of English to determine what is intelligible/acceptable and what is not even in non-nativeenvironments. In the light of this, Adetugbo (1977, p.129) comments:

> Why should Nigerians care that Nigerian English hasforms like, 'He is not seat' or Master, they are looking for you', if these are perfectly acceptable in the Nigerian social context, whether they are unacceptable or unintelligible to the native speakers of English?

If the above argument, bothering on the legitimacy of Nigerian English and its Intelligibility acceptability within the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu is valid, as againsti nsistence on international [native-speakers] standards, then it becomes curious why so much energy would be expended on the 'discrimination' between standard and non-standard English at the home front.

Okoro's (2004) suggestion of an endonormative standard for Nigerian English which, of course, he says must satisfy conditions such as grammaticality, must be forms used informal education, social acceptability, international intelligibility, must enjoy widespread usage among Nigerians, et cetera, seems plausible. However, his acceptance of peculiar Nigerianisms such as 'bride price', 'boys' quarters' to flit a room' (meaning to spray it with insecticide); local idioms such as "she used long leg to obtain the job" (obtaining it through undue influence and favouritism) into the corpus of standard Nigerian English, but not characteristic errors such as redundancies, 'secret ballot', 'new innovation' or "He requested for assistance' raises some concerns.

Such concerns, which are concomitant with the general concerns raised by the spirited delineation of Nigerian English into 'standard', 'non-standard', 'sophisticated', etcetera include:

a. the difficulty in classifying Okoro's users of forms which include peculiar Nigerianisms and local idioms, who would also in the same breath, manifest characteristic breaches of code such as redundancies, omission of determiners before singular nouns, using stative verbs dynamically or even using redundant prepositions. This is cognizant of the fact that these forms enjoy widespread usage among Nigerians than do the internationally intelligible sophisticated forms;
b. the inflexibility on the application of rules making an otherwise dynamic language to seem 'bookish' instead of practical in its usage by speakers;
c. the overtly insistence on technicalities of usage instead of focusing on communication (Eka 2000, p.48) which invariably excludes certain classes of people from the communication process. After all, whereas, users of the standard or sophisticated variety of English do not choose or have control over those with whom they interacton daily basis;
d. the self-consciousness and natural fear of making obvious grammatical blunders, especially by those without formal education, who are at best, less educated in the English Language, thus forcing them to recoil into their shell instead of being active participants in the communication process. This, obviously inhibits the sharing of meaning, which is the essence of communication;
e. the seeming double-standard in the whole debate on Nigerian English, whereby the privileged few users of the sophisticated variety of NE would, in alliance with Nigerian English scholars, reject the traditional prerogative of the native speakers-they constitute a minority however-in determining what is intelligible and acceptable and what is not; yet would, in turn, set standards that must be accepted amongst fellow Nigerian users of English.

In all of the concerns raised by the issue of standard and non-standard Nigerian English, therefore, the pertinent solution seems to lie largely on flexibility, leniency, sincerity as well as willingness on the part of the more educated Nigerians (at least in the English Language)to accommodate those with no formal education or those not well versed with the technicalities of usage in English. While flexibility and leniency demand focus on communication rather than technicalities of usage, especially when communicating with those on the lower linguistic cadre, sincerity relates to the acceptance that much of the speech of users of the non-standard or basic variety of NE are perfectly intelligible even to users of the sophisticated variety. Thus, willingness to apply the above-mentioned qualities of good communication, will ultimately result in readiness to alter or shift the speech characteristics of the sophisticated Nigerian speakers of English who are in the minority, to resemble those of the non-standard users, toward an enhanced communication experience.

Conclusion

The research efforts by linguists, especially those with bias on Nigerian English at classifying its usage within the Nigerian socio-cultural context into varieties, based on level of education are worthy of commendation. Along with such commendation is the need to review the debate that such differentiation along the lines of standard and non-standardusages has generated. Granted, such differentiations do not necessarily imply overt discrimination

between users of the different varieties. Yet, it may inevitably raise the consciousness in users of the standard or sophisticated variety of their linguistic superiority at least over the users of the non-standard variety who may be downcast with a sense of inferiority, at least linguistically.

As interesting, as Okoro's (2004) argument on the need for an endormative standard in NE in line with Nigeria Second Language (L2) status, as enunciated in Kachru's concentric circles of English may be, yet in view of Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-culturalsociolinguistic profile, there is greater need for tolerance of one another among NE users. Bamgbose (1998), Smith (1992), Nelson (1985) among other scholars maintain, with regard to international intelligibility that while international standards may be maintained for international communication, that local intelligibility should however be the concern of Nigerian users. In that same manner, this paper recommends that tolerance be shown by Nigerians on the issue of standard and non-standard in NE. thus, while it is good to maintain the near-native sophistication by the more educated speakers of English, there should however be willingness, in line with Gile's communication accommodation principle, to adapt or alter their speech characteristics to resemble those of the less educated ones in certain communication contexts in order to ensure effective communication.

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