

The Acceptability of Nigerian English Among Senior Secondary School Teachers in Adamawa State

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Abstract

In this study, forty peculiarly Nigerian English expressions were presented to some selected senior secondary school teachers in Adamawa State. The study was specifically designed with two objectives in mind viz: to assess the acceptability of some peculiarly Nigerian English expressions; and to find out whether English language specialists differ from other specialists in their acceptability ratings. The findings indicated that Nigerian English expressions were largely acceptable to the respondents, suggesting that Nigerian English is real and legitimate with them.

Keywords: Nigerian English, acceptability, secondary school, teachers, specialists, peculiar

Introduction

For more than two decades Nigerian academics were engaged in what appeared to be an endless debate on the question of the existence of a local dialect of English in the country (Attah 1998). Presently, there appears to be a consensus of opinion among the academics that Nigerian English does exist, as copious examples of distinctively Nigerian usage have been drawn. The fact that the English language has made some adaptation to the Nigerian milieu since its importation many decades ago lends credence to its existence. Nigerian Linguists seem to agree that it is inevitable for the English language to adopt characteristics that are different from the British norm, since it has to serve the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment.

Adekunle (1985), expressed the view that Nigerian English is that variety of English that essentially meets the peculiar experiences and needs of Nigerians and at the same time intelligible to other users of English. This is anchored on the assertion by Quirk (1968), that “Standard English is basically an ideal ... As an ideal, it cannot be perfectly realized and we must expect that members of the wider community may produce realizations”. Ndahi (1990) posited that there is a variety of English which has emerged as a distinct form, different from other varieties including the parent form. This is because English has been used long enough for it to have formed distinctive features. Nigerian English has peculiarities that mark it off from the English used in other parts of the world where English is used as First Language, Second Language or Foreign Language. This study therefore, investigated the acceptability of peculiarly Nigerian English expressions to selected senior secondary school teachers in Adamawa State.

Characteristics of Nigerian English

Walsh (1967) observed about forty years ago that English expressions “which occur nowhere else in the world” could easily be found in Nigeria. Many studies, (Adekunle 1974, Bamgbose 1982, Kujere 1985, Odumuh 1990, Jowitt 1991, Banjo 1996, Attah 1998, Alabi 2000, Adeniyi 2006) among others have lent support to the adaptation of the English language to the local cultural and linguistic background of Nigeria. However, Attah (1998) cautioned that a distinction should be made between non standard forms that are legitimately Nigerian English, and the substandard forms that are simply mistakes due to imperfect learning of the language. According to him, the identifying characteristics of Nigerian English are not the out-right errors arising from inadequate knowledge of the language, but the established deviations which reflect Nigerian culture and the peoples’ general outlook in life.

Such expressions as “Amina’s co-wife put to bed yesterday” and “Let us join hands to reduce motor accident on our roads” have become part and parcel of the English language in Nigeria, since many Nigerians no longer regard them as imperfectly learned British English. Though the two expressions deviate from British Standard English usage, they clearly express distinctively Nigerians’ views of the concept of “second wife”, “gave birth”, “work together” and “road accident”. It is in connection with such usage that Achebe (1975), opined that, we require a form of English “that will be able to carry the weight of my (read our) African (Nigerian) experience. However, it is a “new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African (Nigerian) surrounding”.

Thus, the divergence between Nigerian English and the other dialects of the language should be considered in terms of variations and deviations which enrich and add flavour to English expressions in the country (Attah 1998). Though the two examples above and others like them are non-standard because of the intrusion of imprints from the Nigerian cultural and linguistic environments, they clearly express the peculiarity of Nigerian experience and perspectives in ways that do no serious damage to Standard English structure or general intelligibility.

It is factual that many studies (Ndahi 1990, Uzozei 1992, Attah 1998) have lent support to the existence of many English expressions that are linked to the local cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the diverse peoples of Nigeria. According to Akere (1978), “English language usage in Nigeria has its own characteristics that set it apart from any native variety”. For him they are not simply deviations from the norms of Standard English but features which characterize Standard Nigerian English. However, in the process of identifying the legitimate Nigerian English expressions, one should be wary of the fact that, many expressions exist among users of the English language which are neither culture bound nor enrich the language in any way. Attah (1998) regarded them “as the bad and the ugly in English usage common among the less educated in the country and characterized by poor phonological, lexical and syntactic features”. Such expressions are exemplified by: “*I prefer living in Mubi than living in Yola*” and “*I have submitted the binded copy of my project*”. These expressions are neither grammatical nor do they represent peculiarities in the way Nigerians structure reality. They are indeed, clear errors of usage which are not included in this study. This is because there is the need to draw a line between undeniable errors of usage and what should be regarded as legitimate Nigerian English.

It is important at this juncture that distinctions made by experts on varieties of written Nigerian English be highlighted. As regards the written form, two distinct varieties are identified: the educated or Standard English and the deviant form, often referred to as the Substandard Nigerian English. (Ubahakwe 1970, Adesanoye 1976, Odumuh 1990). They all agree that proficiency in written English increases with rising level of education. Odumuh (1990) posited that written educated Nigerian English should be associated with the English usage of tertiary level products hence, the choice of the subjects for this study.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to assess the acceptability of some peculiarly Nigerian English expressions to selected senior secondary school teachers in Adamawa State through the following specific objectives:

- i. to investigate the peculiarities of Nigerian English usage that are most acceptable to the respondents;
and
- ii. to find out whether English language specialists differ from other specialists in their acceptability rating.

Methodology and Procedure

The data for this study were generated from 15 senior secondary schools, 5 from each of the 3 Senatorial Zones (Northern, Central, Southern) of the state. Ten (10) graduate teachers were selected from each school, making a total of 150 teachers who supplied the data analyzed. Of this number, 75 (50%), held first degree in English or did a combination which included English, such as B.A.Ed (English) or B.Ed (English). The remaining 75 were graduates of other disciplines.

Each teacher reacted to a forty-point acceptability test which required them to rate each of the forty sentences contained therein, by deciding whether a sentence was acceptable, unacceptable or they were not sure about its correctness. Before each respondent rated the sentences, he was required to respond to a short questionnaire which sought personal data such as degree held, subjects taught and year of graduation. This was necessary for the purpose of comparing acceptability rating in the process of analyzing the data.

Results

The Expressions tested were:

- a. Fixed Standard British English expressions modified to suit Nigerian concepts or perceptions. Examples:
 - i. You have done well, more grease to your elbow.
 - ii. Cut your coat according to your size.
 - iii. They served plenty of hot drinks at the party.
- b. Coinages from Standard British English (Neologisms). Examples:
 - i. He said he had to grease the officer’s palms to get the promotion.
 - ii. His daughter and mine are tight friends
 - iii. I was late for the lectures because of the go-slow on the way
 - iv. I will branch to your house on my way to the office.
- c. British expressions used with extended meaning in Nigerian English. Examples:
 - i. The boy was rude to his senior brother
 - ii. The big man who ate our money has been arrested
 - iii. I came to your office but met your absence
 - iv. I decided to step down for Mr. Peter during the local government elections.

Table 1. Acceptability of the Forty Expressions (N=150)

Category	Score	Percentage
Acceptable	2, 736	55
Unacceptable	762	16
Not Sure	1, 402	29
Total	4, 900	100

Table 1 presents a summary of how the 150 respondents rated the 40 sentences. 55 percent of the sentences were acceptable to them, 16 percent were unacceptable and they were undecided about the correctness of the remaining 29 percent of the sentences.

Table 2: Acceptability by Specialization

Category	No. of Acceptances	Percentage
Specialists	1, 240	45
Non-Specialists	1, 496	55
Total	2, 736	100

As table 2 shows, 45 percent of the sentences were acceptable to the respondents with qualifications in the English language (Specialist), while the non specialists or those with qualifications in fields other than English accepted 55 percent of the sentences.

Discussion of Results

The most Acceptable Peculiarity

To answer the question as to which peculiarities of Nigerian English usage were most acceptable to the subjects of this study a consideration was given to how the forty (40) sentences were rated by the 150 respondents. A total of 4, 900 responses were obtained on the correctness or appropriateness of the 40 items as summarized below:

Acceptable	2, 736	(55 Percent)
Unacceptable	762	(16 Percent)
Not Sure	1, 402	(19 Percent)
Total	4,900	(100 percent)

This shows that 55 percent of the expressions were considered to be definitely and certainly correct and acceptable to the respondents. It can therefore be considered that the respondents used, or would use 55 percent of the expressions as presented. Also, since 16 percent of the sentences were rated as unacceptable by the respondents, it can be assumed that as many as 84 percent of the expressions were considered to be correct or tolerable to the respondents. It is further revealed that some of the respondents made unnecessary corrections or amendments to the items they rejected. For instance, when the sentence “the robbers shot the man on the head” was corrected or amended, many of them retained “on” which should have been replaced by “in”. This may be because it is more realistic from the Nigerian perspective “to shoot on the head” (instead of in the head) since the bullet must first hit or fall “on” the head. This confirms that the subjects used or would use such expressions quite readily even in formal communication activities without realizing that they were peculiarly Nigerian.

When the acceptable expressions were grouped according to their types or characteristics, the findings were as summarized below:

Coinages/Neologisms	997 (36 Percent)
Extended Meaning	936 (35 Percent)
Fixed Expressions	803 (29 Percent)

These findings showed that new words or expressions coined from British Standard English (Neologisms) were marginally most acceptable to the respondents. Neologisms such as “not on seat”, “long leg”, “go-slow” “met your absence” recorded high acceptability on the rating scale. Expressions with extended meaning in Nigerian usage closely followed. Examples of such expressions include; “rejected the dowry”, “trek from the gate to the hostel”, “he had no godfather”, “check me up” etc. Fixed expressions modified to suit Nigerian concepts was next on the rating scale. Some individual sentences in this category received very high acceptability scores. For some, the respondents were not sure of their correctness. Expressions like “more grease to your elbow”, “every nook and corner”, “served plenty of hot drinks” “cut your coat according to your size” etc were highly accepted by the subjects.

Acceptability by Specialization

The intention here as was the case in Attah (1998), was to find out if graduates of English would differ from graduates of other disciplines in their acceptability rating. The result obtained showed the following rating order:

Specialists 45 percent;

Non specialists 55 percent.

This categorization showed that the non-specialists more readily accepted the expressions tested than their specialist counterparts. The major difference between the two groups was that, while the specialists had an “expert” knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of Standard British English (including its idioms and forms), the non-specialists probably lacked such knowledge. The position here was confirmed when the items rejected by each group were carefully examined. It was found that the specialists were more careful in their rating as they rejected every semblance of error in such expressions like; “...met your absence”, “the big man who ate our money,...” turn off the light”, “I naked myself” “The boy is sick upstairs”, “...The thief bolted away”, “I toasted the girl yesterday” etc. While these expressions and others like them were rejected by most of the specialists, the majority of the non-specialists accepted them as correct and appropriate. It would appear that the more conscious one is of the grammar and vocabulary of British Standard English, the less likely will one be to accept Nigerian English usage. Hence, all the items which were acceptable to the majority of the specialists may be considered to have achieved relative stability, at least with the subjects of this study.

Conclusion

In this study the acceptability of selected Nigerian English expressions to selected university graduates in Adamawa State was tested. The findings revealed that a good number of the expressions were either wholly or partially acceptable to the respondents, leading to the conclusion that such expressions had achieved relative stability, at least in Adamawa State. This corroborates Attah’s study of 1998 in Borno State.

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APPENDIX I. Sentences Tested

2, 736 acceptances were recorded. Acceptance per item is indicated with percentages against each item

School

Degree held

Year of graduation

Subject taught

Please read the following sentences carefully and decide on their correctness. Against each sentence, write Acceptable, Unacceptable or Not sure in accordance with your feeling about its correctness. Where you write unacceptable, kindly suggest correction or amendment in the space provided.

1. You have done well, more grease to your elbow 84 (3.1%).
2. Please come back tomorrow, the officer is not on seat 86 (3.1%).
3. John will put up with his uncle in Lagos 78 (2.9%).
4. Aminu gives me a lift in his car every morning 85 (3.1%).
5. We came to your house yesterday but met your absence 42 (1.5%).
6. Birds of the same feather flock together 96 (3.5%).
7. It is time to go to bed, please turn off the light 105 (3.8%).
8. The robbers shot the trader on the head 108 (3.9%).
9. The big man who ate our money has been arrested 60 (2.2%).
10. The principal said he would travel to Lagos tomorrow 102 (3.7%).
11. I have checked for the book, but it was not found on the shelf 40 (1.5%).
12. The students are expected to trek from the gate to the hostel 105 (3.8%).
13. He said to my hearing that I was a bad man 81 (3.0%).
14. He had to grease the officer's palm to get his promotion 50 (1.8%).
15. He suffered in the civil service because he had no godfather 95 (3.5%).
16. My wife had taken in, we will need a nanny as soon as she puts to bed 85 (3.1%).
17. I naked myself as I entered my room 34 (1.2%).
18. We discussed about the outcome of the meeting 65 (2.4%).
19. The wedding didn't hold, because the bride's parents rejected the dowry 110 (4.0%).
20. My father always says, he that dines with the devil must have a long spoon 119 (4.3%).
21. Ali has searched every nook and corner for his missing money 101 (3.7%).
22. I want you to check me up on your way to the office 72 (2.6%).
23. Unfortunately, the thief bolted away before the policemen arrived 44 (1.6%).
24. I toasted the girl yesterday 54 (2.0%).
25. Olu's daughter and mine are tight friends 54 (2.0%).
26. I will branch to your house on my way from school 45 (1.6%).
27. I escorted my friend to the gate 54 (2.0%).
28. He ran into the bush for his dear life 50 (1.8%).
29. John was awarded the scholarship because he has long legs 53 (1.9%).
30. Cut your coat according to your size 70 (2.6%).
31. We went to condole Ali when his father died 50 (1.8%).
32. Joseph is always requesting for money from his father 58 (2.1%).
33. They served plenty of hot drinks at the party 84 (3.1%).
34. The accident occurred at that sharp corner 65 (2.4%).
35. He was rude to his senior brother 65 (2.4%).
36. We joined the taxi near the market place 50 (1.8%).
37. I decided to step down for Mr. Peter during the last House of Assembly elections 65 (2.4%).
38. Payment of April salary is a sure banker 51 (1.9%).
39. I was late for lectures because of the go-slow on the way 75 (2.7%).
40. The boy is sick upstairs 40 (1.5%).

APPENDIX II: British Standard English Versions of the Sentences Tested

1. You have done well, more power to your elbow.
2. Please come back tomorrow, the officer is not in the office.
3. John will live with his uncle in Lagos.
4. Aminu gives me a free ride in his car every morning.
5. We came to your house yesterday, but you were not at home.
6. Birds of a feather flock together.
7. It is time to go to bed, please switch off the light.
8. The robbers shot the trader in the head.
9. The wealthy man who embezzled our money has been arrested.
10. The principal said that he would make a trip to Lagos tomorrow.
11. I have searched for the book, but it was not found on the shelf.
12. The students are expected to walk from the gate to the hostel.
13. He said in my hearing that I was a bad man.
14. He had to offer the officer bribes to get his promotion.
15. He suffered in the civil service because he had no benefactor.
16. My wife is pregnant we will need a babysitter as soon as she gives birth.
17. I stripped myself naked as soon as I entered my room.

18. We discussed the outcome of the meeting.
19. The wedding did not hold, because the bride's parents rejected the bride price.
20. My father always says, he that sups with the devil must have a long spoon.
21. Ali has searched every nook and cranny for his missing money.
22. I want you to call on me on your way to the office.
23. Unfortunately, the thief escaped before the policemen arrived.
24. I wooed/courted the girl yesterday.
25. Olu's daughter and mine are intimate friends.
26. I will visit you in your house on my way from school.
27. I saw off my friend to the gate.
28. He fled into the bush for dear life.
29. John was awarded the scholarship because of nepotism.
30. Cut your coat according to your cloth.
31. We went to condole with Ali when his father died.
32. Joseph always requests for money from his father.
33. They served plenty of hard drinks at the party.
34. The accident occurred at that sharp bend.
35. He was rude to his elder brother.
36. We boarded the taxi near the market place.
37. I decided to stand down for Mr. Peter during the last House of Assembly elections.
38. The payment of salaries for the month of April is very certain.
39. I was late for lectures because of the traffic hold up on the way.
40. The boy is insane.