

The Sociology of Nigerian English: Trends in English Usage in Aba Example

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Abstract

This paper investigates contemporary trends in the English language usage in the Nigerian situation, with specific reference to Aba, a popular commercial metropolitan city with international markets in the South East of Nigeria. The study examines the influence of the English language on patterns of language choice, attitudes and language use in the society and also highlights how some sociolinguistics and socio-cultural variables in turn determine the development of the English language in the society. The study adopts a survey approach. Instruments for data collection include questionnaire, interview and observation. Data were analysed using sociolinguistics tools; Variationist linguistics serves to account for the influence of social variables and structures such as the commercial group on the innovations, development and subtle change in English in the multilingual society. Information from the study highlights that English in the Nigerian situation yields to further nativisation as it continues to serve the diverse ends of different categories of users. Hence, policies relating to language and national development need consider the sociocultural context of English usage in Nigeria.

Keywords: language use, language attitude, language accommodation, language change

1. Introduction

Language as a dynamic tool in communication and social interaction easily responds to the social ambivalence in the society in which it is used. Language changes for myriad reasons, but basically it bends to accommodate the needs of the users. Wilhem VonHumboldt cited in Aitchison (1991: 3) succinctly asserts that, "there can never be a true moment of standstill in language... language is in a continuous process of development." For instance, English as a world language constantly undergoes changes (especially as evinced in the rapid turnover of vocabulary), even as it gains more geographical spread. *Inter alia*, these changes reflect the social and cultural contexts of these societies; the varieties of English and their norms for use emerge to meet the needs of the local community (Mckay & Hornberger, 1996: 4).

For there to be any meaning discourse on language development and for English language studies to be relevant in the society, there is need for update information on the emerging patterns in usage. Such information could be utilized to modify existing theories in the language. To this end, this study on the sociology of English in a Nigeria's multilingual society is bound to reveal the interface between English and the indigenous languages, highlight how English has been stretched to accommodate the peculiar communication needs of the users in the society and reveal the current state of English in the Nigerian situation.

2. Justifications for the Study

Some salient issues provide the justification for this study. First, information about the status of a language in a society, whether native or L₂ further shapes the social climate for its study (Mckay & Hornberger, 1996). Owing to the importance of English as a gateway to national and global economy, studies on English becomes relevant to societal development. English, a language which was introduced into the Nigerian society during the European mercantilist activity has over the years grown to dominate the linguistic terrain of the country. Igboanusi (1997) observes that about 20% of Nigerian population speak English. But, information from this study reflects that the percentage of users has significantly increased (we hasten to add that the spread does not entail the use of the standard variety). This informs the need to examine the evolving patterns in the development of the variety of English in Nigeria, which has been identified as Nigerian English (NE) and to highlight the various influences on the trends.

Literature on NE has mainly been on features identification (see Jowitt 1991), variety differentiation and recently on the standardisation and codification of Standard Nigerian English (SNE). Attention on features identification of NE seems to be more on collecting samples of these 'curious' forms and at singing elegies of declining standards in English, without considering the socio-cultural factors that influence the patterns of usage. The sociolinguistic survey of Aba reflects the spread of English language in all domains of language use. This makes an average person in Aba (educated and non-educated) to assert that he speaks English. Might the use of English by people who have limited facility in the language not have contributed to the proliferation of non-standard forms? This study is premised on the proposition that any meaningful effort towards the codification of SNE has to consider the factors that influence the trends as NE has become a vibrant language that constantly evolves. Thus, the codification of the innovative forms without taking a proactive approach towards its further development may not yield significant results.

This paper also has some educational considerations. English is the language of education in Nigeria and poor performance of students in education is usually premised on their performance in English. In turn, poor performance of students in English is usually attributed to poor teaching methods (Adekunle, 1995; Igboanusi, 2002). The notion that teaching methods should be improved has been a recurring theme, which has led to innovations in language teaching skills (see Mgbemena, 2005), yet the results are not significantly better. There are many other factors that affect language learning. A strong candidate is reinforcement, while another is interference. Where do we get these from – the school or the society? Students from the pre-primary level are taught with text books written in School English (SE) but what variety of English are they exposed to outside the classroom setting? What variety does the teacher use outside the school environment? The variety of English that is being used in the society will invariably interfere with students' learning and could the wrong forms not have been fossilized? Poor performance (whatever the source) feeds high schools and relayed into higher institutions and may it not have spiralled into the quality of teachers?

Bowers (1995: 93) points out a salient issue in the future of English language education in Nigeria:

Where do we go next in terms of ideas about language teaching, and where will those ideas come from? They will not come from theory – whether theory of language and communication or even theory of education. Generally in the time past and perhaps too frequently, developments in language education have been supply-led rather than demand-led; the advances have been initiated by the teachers rather than the learners. It is not sure that the next time around that will be the case.

For English language education in Nigeria to adopt a proactive approach and become 'demand-led', a sociolinguistic study of the environment of the L2 learners becomes apt. This paper is based on the opinion that things will begin to improve if we take note of the larger community in which the students reside; where they get reinforcement, interference, and possibly atrophied in their language learning. In this vein, this study becomes relevant as it examines related societal challenges and influences that directly affect English language education in Aba and by extension Nigeria. For instance, it considers the trends in language use and highlights whether the trends are reversible or irreversible.

On the other hand, the documentation of the innovations in New Englishes is still ongoing. The city under study is an Igbo society and literature on the English usage of Igbo people is scanty. Therefore, this attempt to highlight and describe the evolving trends in English usage in Aba serves to provide literature on a regional variety of Nigerian English – Igbo English. Information on Igbo English will invariably bridge the gap and assist in the codification of SNE.

3. Research Procedure

A quest to study trends in English usage in all language groups in Nigeria lies beyond the scope of this work as no single scholar can accomplish such a feat; therefore, this study uses the English language situation in Aba metropolis as an example. Aba as a popular commercial metropolis attracts people from diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria. At least, data from this research can be used to extrapolate on the situation in similar societies in Nigeria. The study considers the delimitation viable as a microcosm in reality. This study also recognizes that as a metropolis, the city is inhabited by people who may have various dialects of English in their repertoire. However, English as it is used here is bound up with the culture of the city in multiple and complex ways (Kramsch, 1998). Therefore, this work provides a sociolinguistic profile of Aba in order to highlight the dominant culture of the dwellers. English as a second language in Nigeria suggests the existence of an indigenous language(s), hence, an overview of language use in Aba and the domains in which English is used. This study also examines the attitudes and influences of the users of English in Aba.

Every socio-economic class and group (ethnic, religious, educational, etc.) in Aba meets and interacts at different points such as; the markets, the churches, motor parks, cultural and community meetings, hospitals, banks, etc. This study identifies these different places as domains of language use. Hence, data for this investigation were primarily obtained from these domains using the stratified random sampling technique. The tools used in data collection include: consultants, observation, interviews, and questionnaire. Using the Labovian approach to language variation, in particular Labov (1968), this work attempts to account for the social groups that influence language variation and change in English usage in Aba.

4. The Sociolinguistic Profile of Aba



Figure 1. Map of Aba

Source: www.mapzones.com

Aba is the commercial hub of Abia state in Nigeria. It lies at the South Eastern part of the country. Aba was declared a second class township in 1922 by the colonial administration and it became an urban district in 1953. It has an undulating landscape that favours agriculture, transportation and other occupations.

Aba is characterized by its commercial nature. It has one of the largest trade centres in Nigeria called – *Ariaria* International market. There are other international as well as smaller markets in Aba. Over 80% of the city dwellers are engaged in commercial and industrial activities – fabrication of small scale machines, technical equipment, bags and shoes.

To an extent, Aba is a homogenous city; it is mostly inhabited by the Igbo from different dialect groups, but *Igbo Izugbe* (Central Igbo) serves as the dialect of mutual intelligibility. As an enterprising commercial town, a good number of people from different ethnic groups in Nigeria visit and reside in the metropolis. There is also international presence in Aba; neighbouring Francophone countries (Cameroon, Togo, Benin Republic), Anglophone Africa, Asians (Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese), who deal on hardwares – motorcycles, power generators and electronics. There are Indians, Western Europeans and Americans too. The majority of non-Nigerians who visit and reside in Aba learn English as a foreign language. They merely acquire enough English to enable them transact business, so their aim is purely communication. Foreigners who visit or reside in Aba speak different varieties of English (standard and non-standard). But, an average Aba trader views every white man as a good English speaker and considers his variety as the standard to follow.

The population mix described above reflects a multilingual setting. The linguistic plurality will force many dialects of English on the city. The varieties of English in use in Aba can be traced with Bamgbose’s (1995) illustration of Nigerian English family tree.

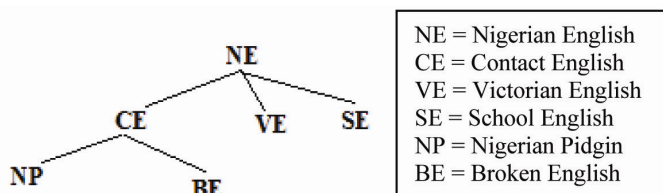


Figure 2. Nigerian English family tree (adapted from Bamgbose 1995)

From the sociolinguistic background of the city, one can infer that the varieties of Nigerian English in use in Aba would be more of Contact English than Victorian or School English. This investigation notes that Nigerian Pidgin is not common in Aba; it is mainly used in the motor parks, on the campuses and in the barracks, especially by students and national security personnel - the police and the Nigerian army.

4.1 Domains of English Usage in Aba

A survey of Aba linguistic terrain reflects the spread and use of English; different varieties of English are used in virtually all communication domains including cultural communication contexts. Although Igbo is the major language of communication in the society, city dwellers (literate and non-literate) who do not understand English sometimes suffer some disadvantages in business and official domains where some English words and expressions have become part of the register. Some situations that require the use of the English language include: trading, payment of electricity bills, writing and reading of receipts for fares, registration of properties, among others. This study notes that some speakers have different varieties in their repertoire and use them according to the context.

English is the main language of advertisement - on the sign posts, billboards, addresses and names of streets, public places such as post office. It is the language of information from the government.

English is the major language of documentation in all the domains – religion, politics, business, administration, socio-cultural, among others – receipts for rents, documents used for transfer of property, notice of meetings, minutes of meetings, certificates, obituary announcements, among others.

English is pre dominantly the language of education in Nigeria as well as a subject of study. In some private schools, school children are required to use English as a medium of communication within the school premises, while disobedience to this rule attracts some punitive measures.

The use of English extends beyond formal educational setting: in the transportation sector, in various commercial centres (sometimes to impress customers) with all the mispronunciations and adaptations, etc. Consider these samples of expressions:

- 1) Don't mind Sunny, he is a *stract* illiterate. (stark)
- 2) Watch that *imbecide!* (imbecile)
- 3) That Charlies shoe no get *arrival*. (rival)
- 4) The Governor is in that *convoid*. (convoy)
- 5) Government has *bound* the importation of rice. (banned)
- 6) Am I the one *pursuing you?* (driving you away)

In the churches, hospitals, banks, and modern communication centres (the GSM, cybercafé), innovations in English usage abound. For example, Pentecostal churches have popularised such words and expressions as – *Bless you* (a shortened form of *May God bless you*), *binding and losing*, *backsliding*, *it is not my portion!* into the societal lexicon. Some denominations forbid the use of negative expressions which are regarded as taboo words, thus, *I am very rich* is used to express *I am broke* and *It is well with my soul* could mean *I am passing through some hard times*. Also, some negative situations are often expressed with euphemism – *she has gone to be with the Lord* is used to express death; the word 'obituary' is fast disappearing from the societal lexicon!

In official domain such as banks, communication companies, English is often used, sometimes not as the medium of interaction but the language of documentation. In the hospitals, a lot of English words are required in communication even among the Igbo. This situation inadvertently results in diglossia and heavy transfers, especially the borrowing and adaptation of English technical terms to Igbo, as some of the terms have no Igbo names.

The domain of English use in a typical Nigerian urban society is unlimited; the family setting is not excluded. While the influence of the standard forms goes unnoticed, the sub-standard ones in particular, the urban vernacular add to the evolving patterns.

4.2 Language Use and Preference in Aba

Data on language use and preference were derived from responses from questionnaire (see appendix 1). 100 copies of the questionnaire were given to consultants across different age groups and sex in the selected domains of English usage in Aba. The classification of the age group of the respondents comprises A. 15-20yrs B. 20-30yrs C. 30-40yrs D. 40-50yrs E. 50 yrs and above. People within the age range of category A-D, were more willing to volunteer as consultants, thus 79% of the information from the questionnaire were derived from

people below 50 years. The percentage of female respondents is 57.3% and the male 43.7%. Their responses are reported in the tables below:

Table 1. Language use, language choice and language proficiency rating in Aba

Table 1a. Language use in different domains

	English %	Igbo %	English/Igbo and any other Nigerian language %
Home			
with children	55	25	20
with parents	15	80	5
with house-help	33	47	20
with friends	40	22.5	Eng. & Igbo 30, Pidgin 7.5
Other domains			
Church	70	25	5
Market	23	50	27
village meeting	17.5	72.5	10
Hospital	67.5	12.5	13.5, not sure 6.5
Bank	77.5	10	12.5
school classroom	55	2.5	10
outside the class room	25	15	20

Table 1b. Language choice

	English	Igbo	Both and any other indigenous language
ordinary situations	40	40	15
important occasion	75	15	10
when anxious or angry	70	20	10
when happy	60	20	5 Nigerian Pidgin 15

Table 1c. Language proficiency

Language facility	English	Igbo & other indigenous language	
	58%	42%	
Switch to English	73%	27%	
Frequency of English interference	a lot	few words	lengthy sentences
	51%	23%	26%
Personal proficiency rating	very poor	good	very good
	12%	28%	60%

Information on the table above on the language preference of the consultants in different domains indicates that English is preferred to the indigenous languages. This corroborates the data derived from observation as stated in 4.1 above. Data as contained in the table above indicate that 55% of the consultants, who comprise people below fifty years, use only English to communicate with their children at home in a predominantly Igbo society. The implication is that children from these homes are not likely to learn and consequently speak their Mother Tongue. It is also stated in the table that 40% of the respondents prefer to interact with their friends in English. These are indicators of the preference and attachment of people who may not be proficient in the language to English.

Data on language use in other domains outside the family/home also reflect the general preference and dominance of the English language in diverse communication contexts in the society. Thus, English plays a prominent role in cultural and community meetings. Aside from serving as the language of documentation, the register employed in deliberations at such meetings even when conducted in Igbo language is drawn from English vocabulary.

Data on language choice also highlights the frequency of code switching in communication in this society. This yields to a peculiar diglossic situation. It is peculiar because the transfer of English lexical items and expressions are usually done to achieve a specific effect especially in expressing emotions and negotiating identity.

To this end, the explanation of these patterns in language use in this society has to consider the sociocultural influences that have contributed to the spread and dominance of English.

4.3 Attitudes and Influences on English Usage in Aba

The reason for the spread of English in Aba metropolis can be attributed to many factors. Although one can identify two candidates – one is purely utilitarian (communication) and the other borders on prestige (aspiration).

The necessity to communicate in situations that require English has forced many Igbo who reside in Aba to acquire some English lexical items. The proliferation of foreign culture both material and non-material via globalisation and technology into Nigeria has also given rise to a significant increase in the number of English words and expressions into the societal lexicon.

On the other hand, English has become a world language. English across the globe has been identified as the language of power: social, economic, political, etc. Nigerians understand that the language does not just serve as a status marker but also provides a link to global information and economic grid. Generally, oral communication among the Igbo in Aba reflects their positive attitude and preference for English vocabulary and speech mannerism. This attitude could be what Achebe (1979) describes as the Igbo “cultural disposition to look outside and to wish to lose themselves in ‘larger’ customs and cultures”.

As a result of these two broad reasons, people who are not educated and have not learnt English formally attempt to use English lexical items, at least to communicate. Also, a good number of those who are not educated have found themselves outside Igbo land by reason of itinerant trading, crafts learning and they had to learn to speak at least the Nigerian Pidgin. Often, these ones do not acquire the standard variety of English, but are bold in using their limited command of the language even when it is full of errors. Also, some of the consultants in this study indicated that they acquired some English lexical items and expressions from non educational settings – church, workplace, in the neighbourhood where they live, among others.

The attitude of Aba people in relation to their use of English cannot be said to be homogenous. While some see it as a status marker and attempt to speak the standard forms, some others look at it purely from the utilitarian perspective. They tend to appreciate the status and function of English, but do not bother much about learning the standard forms. For this latter group, when people point out the errors in their usage, they make light of it, some may even take offence and some actually become aggressive. For example, if one attempts to correct a tout at the motor park who chants, *one chances two chance*, he may not drop the wrong form. Only 33% percent of the respondents indicated in the questionnaire that they do not mind if people attempt to correct their wrong English usage. The general attitude appears to be “*after all English is not my language.*” So, people just endeavour to understand any form.

This investigation notes that the use of English in the commercial centres influences the other forms used in the other domains in the society as they often give names to the trade items, profession and other aspects of culture in the society. The expression *Carry Go* (a prompt to forge ahead), which emanated from the commercial centres, is used everywhere in the society – music, transportation, churches, advertisement, schools, and even in manufacturing. The expression labels so many products – detergents, lozenges, stickers, motor cycles, shirts have different versions of *Carry Go* as standard brand name; it is being accepted into the societal lexicon. In social gatherings and religious crusades, expressions imported from these trade centres are used to achieve audience participation. Such expressions include, *no shaking* (expression of courage and undauntedness) and *shine your eyes* (a call for one to be alert/act smartly).

While the commercial group facilitates the use of non-standard and innovative forms of English, the church is seen as an agent of the English language development in Nigeria. About 15% of the respondents indicated specifically that they acquired English from the church. In Nigeria, Christianity has been central to the history and development of English. The society under study is predominantly a Christian community, and is experiencing a proliferation of Pentecostal churches at every corner of the city. Young people are attracted to their use of English and the contemporary Americanised method of worship. This group promotes the Black American English variety, such as *wanna, gonna, you guys, as in, somebody give Jesus a big hand*. Their use of such popular expressions as – *it is well, brethren, I bind, I cast,* can be traced to the old English of the King James version of the Bible; a re-incarnation of the old English in the societal lexicon.

Nigerians generally are connected to the global information grid via the internet, telecommunication, cable television. These global communication networks predominantly use English, especially the American variety. For some young people, the use of English in these American-based cable television stations serves as the

standard variety and the model to imitate. The use of slang and swear words such as – *fuck you, aint doing it, no nothing, ass hole, etc.*, is largely influenced by Black American English.

The introduction of global information technology gadgets, for example – the global system mobile GSM and INTERNET – has given rise to some form of creativity in the use of the new vocabulary items, especially in slang and jibes. The words in italics in the following expressions illustrate this point:

- 1) My old man *don delete*, we will travel next week to *download* him.
- 2) (My father is dead, we will travel next week to bury him).
- 3) Since you are not talking, let me keep quiet. It appears this conversation has entered into *voicemail* (monologue).
- 4) It is too early to start this *mouth browsing* (gossip).

English as a world language has resulted in the phenomenon of dialectal differences. Nigerians, especially the youths are constantly in touch with the different Englishes used across the globe. Thus, this investigation takes cognisance of the influence of World Englishes on the use of English in Aba.

This study notes the global outcry of decline in the standard of English usage even in English native soil (England and America). Aitchison (1991: 1- 4) records some of these complaints which include; ‘growing unintelligibility of spoken English’, ‘over simplification of English grammar’, among others. The study does not view this as a negative phenomenon which should be reversed, but rather as language change, an inevitable trend. Aitchison (1991), thus, asserts that some intelligent people resent language change and see it as laziness in the use of language or ignorance, but, since everything can transform itself with time, it will be strange if language remains the same. This statement implies that to some extent, what is known as the Standard variety (native speakers’ variety) is constantly changing. The question that arises is, does the decline in the standard of native speakers variety as pointed out by Aitchison (1991) not affect the other varieties of English, especially in ESL and EFL situation? This points to the issue that some patterns of usage which some language purist seek to reverse may not be reversible.

5. Conclusion

Considering all these variables, it is evident that there is a changing trend in the English language uses and usages in Aba and by extension Nigeria. But, so is it in the natural setting of the language. Just as the increase in the global demand for English yields to further nativisation, variation and changes, also in Nigeria and other places where the English language is used either as a second or foreign language, as the quest for English increases, competency in the English language decreases! However, one should be furnished with sources of undesirable and negative forms, at least for formal situations like schools and international interaction. On the other hand, information from this study reflects the need to modify existing frameworks on the English language education and studies in Nigeria. It also highlights the status and trends in the use of the indigenous languages and directs attention towards the need for viable language policy that will directly aid balanced language development in Nigeria.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed for research on language use in Aba; to examine the factors that affect the use of English in the metropolis. Please answer the following questions carefully and sincerely, we respect your opinion and will treat your response with utmost confidence.

Kindly fill in your response in the blank spaces provided for each question, where options are provided underline the appropriate response.

Personal Data:

Occupation.....

Educational Qualification.....

Sex.....

Age range: [15yrs-20yrs] [20yrs-30yrs] [30yrs-40yrs] [40yrs-50yrs] [50yrs and above]

1. Which languages do you speak? [Igbo] [English] state any other.....
 2. What language do you prefer to use in.....
 - a. ordinary situation? [Igbo] [English] state any other.....
 - b. important occasions? [Igbo] [English] State any other.....
 3. Which language seems easier for you to communicate in?.....
 4. What languages do you use at home with your children.....
- Parents....., house-help.....friends.....
5. What languages do you often use in expressing yourself when anxious/angry..... or happy?.....
 6. Which language do you use in the church....., market....., village meeting.....hospital.....bank.....
 7. If you are a teacher or a student, which language do you use in the classroom....., outside the classroom?.....
 8. How did you learn English? [school] [church] [home] state others.....
 9. Do you achieve your purpose easily by using English?.....
 10. Rate your present ability in English [very poor] [poor] [good] [very good]
 11. Do you find yourself speaking involuntarily in English, even when Igbo is required? [yes] [no].
 12. How do you feel when someone corrects your incorrect use of English? [I don't mind] [I feel insulted] [I would love it] specify any other.....
 13. How much of English do you get into your conversation? [a lot] [few words] [sometimes lengthy sentences].

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