

SYNTACTIC INNOVATION PROCESSES IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the syntactic features of Nigerian English which have been created through the following processes – the use of subjectless sentences, reduplication, double subjects, Pidgin-influenced structures, discourse particles, verbless sentences, and substitution. It observes that the fact that some features of Nigerian English syntax are shared by other new Englishes is a healthy development for the identity of non-native varieties around the world. It finally recommends the codification of the new norms into variety-specific grammars and a common grammar of new Englishes.

1. Introduction

The documentation of the various features of world Englishes has continued to attract the attention of the linguistic scholar. Like other varieties of non-native Englishes, West African English (WAE) has received considerable attention (see, for example, Spencer 1971; Sey 1973; Bamgbose – Banjo – Thomas 1995; Wolf 2001; Igboanusi 2002a). However, not much has been published on the syntax of WAE in general and that of Nigerian English (NE) in particular. The general belief is that grammatical features of national varieties of WAE are not exclusive, and can also be found in other varieties of New Englishes (cf. Peter – Wolf – Simo Bobda 2003: 44). For example, some scholars (notably Todd 1982; Bamgbose 1992; Bamiro 1995) observe that most of the syntactic patterns in educated WAE are similar to those of other new Englishes. However, Todd identifies the following syntactic variations of WAE: the indiscriminate use of the tag questions *isn't it/not so?* as in *it doesn't matter, not so/isn't it?*; differences in the use of some phrasal verbs, e.g. *cope up with* for 'cope with'; failure to sometimes distinguish between countable and non-countable nouns (e.g. *an*

advice, firewoods, behaviors). Bamiro's (1995) study on the syntactic variation of WAE was a more comprehensive investigation than earlier studies on the subject matter. Using data from creative literature, Bamiro identifies the following variations: subjectless sentences, e.g. *Is because she's a street walker* for 'It is because...?'; deletion of *-ly* morpheme in manner adjuncts, e.g. *Send patrol van to pick her up quick* (quickly); omission of function words, e.g. *You say truth* ('... the truth'); reduplication, e.g. *Slowly, slowly the canoe moved like the walk of an old man* (gradually); formation of interrogatives without changing the position of subject and auxiliary items, e.g. *You've decided finally then?* ('Have you finally decided then?'); tag questions, e.g. *You are writing a paper about our organization, not so?* ('Isn't it?'); the use of the progressive aspect with mental processes, e.g. *Do you know what I am hearing?* ('Do you know what I hear these days?'); non-distinctive use of reciprocal pronouns, e.g. *The captains (seven of them) looked at each other somewhat perplexed* ('one another'); substitution of preposition in idiomatic usage, e.g. *That is why they have dragged the good name of my father, Joshua, son of Fagbola in the mud* ('through'); focus constructions, e.g. *You are a funny man, you this man*.

With regard to NE, Banjo (1995: 217) observes that "empirical contrastive study of the syntax of Nigerian and British English goes back to the era of error analysis and contrastive linguistics" (e.g. the works of Tomori 1967; Banjo 1969; Odumuh 1981; Kujore 1985). Further works on the syntax of NE are found in Odumuh (1987); Jowitt (1991); Bamgbose (1992); Kujore (1995) and Banjo (1995). For example, Odumuh (1987: 60-65) identifies some "typical variations between British English and Nigerian English as spoken by tertiary educated informants". Some of his examples include:

- 1) They *enjoyed* for BE 'They enjoyed themselves' (*enjoyed* occurs intransitively in NE structure while it is usually transitive in BE);
- 2) He *pregnanted* her for BE 'He made her pregnant' (while NE structure uses *pregnanted* as a verb, the word *pregnant* occurs in BE as an adjective);
- 3) You like that, *isn't it?* for BE 'You like that, don't you?' (in BE, while the negative question tag is always determined by the verb, it is often represented in NE by *isn't it?*);
- 4) Give me meat for BE 'Give me some meat' (omission of article in NE structure but not in BE structure);
- 5) I am having your book for BE 'I have your book' (NE structure uses the *ing* as a stative marker);
- 6) He has been there since for BE 'He has been there for some time' (NE structure uses an adverbial adjunct while BE structure has a preposition followed by an adjunct).

Jowitt (1991) provides the following examples:

- 7) He *offed* the light for BE ‘He put off the light’ (1991: 112 – functional derivation);
- 8) After the referee might have arrived the match will begin for BE ‘After the referee has arrived the match will begin’ (1991: 120 – illustrates the use of modals in NE);
- 9) *My father he* works under NEPA for ‘My father works in NEPA’ (1991: 121 – subject copying).

A further example is:

- 10) I have filled the application form for BE ‘I have filled in the application form’ (Kujore 1995: 371 – illustrates the use of the verb fill in NE where the preposition in is deleted);

It has to be pointed out here that some of the syntactic features illustrated as characterizing WAE or NE by existing studies are in fact shared by other varieties of English. For instance, Kachru (1982, 1983, etc.) has noted the following syntactic features in South Asian English – reduplication, formation of interrogatives without changing the position of subject and auxiliary items, tag questions, differences associated with the use of articles, etc. Similarly, Skandera (2002: 98-99) identifies some of the grammatical features of all ESL varieties which do not occur in Standard English to include missing verb inflections, missing noun inflections, pluralisation of uncountable nouns, use of adjectives as adverbs, avoidance of complex tenses, different use of articles, flexible position of adverbs, lack of inversion in indirect questions, lack of inversion and *do*-support in *wh*-questions, and invariant question tags. The fact that many of the features of NE or WAE syntax identified in earlier studies are also shared by other new Englishes is an indication that new Englishes around the world now have identifiable linguistic characteristics. What needs to be done is to intensify research on comparisons of these features across national and regional varieties of non-native Englishes with a view to separating exclusive features of these varieties from general or universal markers.

2. Syntactic innovation processes

The present study is an attempt to account for innovations in the syntax of NE resulting from the sociolinguistic context of Nigeria, namely Nigerian Pidgin English and the indigenous languages. How is “innovation” to be perceived? To this question, Bamgbose (1998: 2) states that an innovation is to be seen as “an acceptable variant”. The problem here is to determine whether a usage or struc-

ture is an innovation or an error. What is seen as an innovation in a non-native variety of English may be perceived as an error by most native speakers of English. This problem is resolved the very moment we recognize the roles of social convention as well as the relationship between social structure and linguistic form in the use of new Englishes (cf. Banda 1996: 68). As Skandera (2002: 99) has rightly observed, "if the characteristic features of an ESL variety come to be used with a certain degree of consistency by educated speakers, and are no longer perceived as 'mistakes' by the speech community, then that ESL variety becomes *endonormative* (or *endocentric*), i.e. it sets its own norms". Most of the examples provided in the present investigation are so frequently heard in the speech of many educated users of NE that they have ceased to be regarded as errors.

3. The data

The data for this study is based on my observations through recordings and field investigations over the past five years. The recordings involve mainly the formal and informal conversations of educated speakers of NE at different social events, conferences and seminars, and students' conversation as well as the conversations of less educated NE speakers. The informal recordings reflect different settings, sexes, ages, and ethnic and educational backgrounds. Some of the data used in this work are also drawn from radio and television discussions. I have adopted some of the categories of syntactic variation in WAE identified by Bamiro, which are commonly found in NE. They include: reduplication, subjectless sentences, substitution of preposition in idiomatic usage, and use of double subjects. I have supplemented these categories with such new ones as the use of verbless sentences, Pidgin-influenced structures, and structures influenced by the use of discourse particles. Although many of the processes of syntactic innovation discussed in this paper may occur in other varieties of WAE or new Englishes, the sources of their influence and patterns of their use may be different. It is also important to note that some of these syntactic categories are very important features of creation in the style of many Nigerian and West African writers (as Bamiro has shown) and are regularly founded in Nigerian newspapers and magazines. In other words, they are not only restricted to colloquial contexts. Their uses also cut across different levels of education.

I have carefully presented features which are found in both the basilectal and acrolectal varieties of NE. I have identified the variety of NE in which a particular feature is dominant. British English (BE) equivalents to the examples are provided in parenthesis after each example.

English in Nigeria presents interesting problems because even the acrolectal variety is caught between the Standard BE norms and basilectal pidgin. This complex situation inevitably tolerates influences from Nigerian languages (as

with the case of discourse particles and reduplication) and Nigerian Pidgin (as with the case of Pidgin-influenced structures).

3.1. Subjectless sentences

There is a preponderant use of subjectless sentences in the speech of NE users. This practice involves the omission of the subject *it* in NE structures. Where this omission occurs in the speech of educated users of NE, it is largely influenced by the process of shortening in which the form *It's* is reduced to *Is*, especially in spoken English. Where it occurs in the speech of less educated users of NE, it may be as a result of the influence of Nigerian Pidgin (NP) in which *na* is transferred as *is* into NE structures. Consider the following examples:

- a) Is very far ('It's very far').
- b) Is about three hours or more ('It's about three hours or more').
- c) Is about ten dollars ('It's about ten dollars').
- d) Is the woman ('It's the woman').

Although subjectless sentences may not be found in the written form of the acrolectal variety, it does exist in the written form of the basilectal variety.

3.2. Reduplication

Although reduplication has been treated by Bobda (1994) and Igboanusi (1998) as lexical process of innovation, Kachru (1982) has noted that the reduplication of items belongs to various word classes. For instance, some English words are often reduplicated or repeated consecutively, either for emphasis, pluralisation, or to create new meanings. Bobda (1994: 258) has rightly identified three categories of words, which generally undergo the process of reduplication: numerals, intensifiers and quantifiers. And as Igboanusi (2002b) has observed, while the occurrence of a second numeral denotes 'each' (as in *one-one*, *half-half*), the reduplication of an intensifier or a quantifier may be for emphasis (as in *many-many*, *now-now*, *before-before*, *fast-fast*, *fine-fine*, *slowly-slowly*) or for pluralisation (as in *big-big*, *small-small*). Examples are:

- a) Please drive *slowly-slowly* because the road is bad ('Please drive very slowly because the road is bad').
- b) *Before-before*, food was very cheap in this country ('In the past, food was very cheap in this country').
- c) Please get me two more bottles of beer *fast-fast* ('Please get two bottles of beer for me very quickly').

- d) I visited my friend's campus and I saw many *fine-fine* girls ('I visited my friend's campus and I saw several fine girls').
- e) Give me *half-half* bag of rice and beans ('Give me half bag each of rice and beans').
- f) We were asked to pay *one-one* hundred Naira as fine for contravening the environmental sanitation law ('We were asked to pay one hundred Naira each as fine for contravening the environmental sanitation law').
- g) Do you have *small-small* beans? ('Do you have small brand of beans?').
- h) You put it *small small* ('It is put little by little').
- i) I have *small small* children in the house ('I have young children in the house').
- j) He claims not to have money and yet he's busy building *big-big* houses all over the city ('He claims not to have money and yet he's busy building several big houses all over the city').
- k) *Many many* speak English ('The majority of the people speak English').
- l) He visits me at *three three* weeks interval ('He visits me at three week intervals').
- m) Me I was *running running* ('I was busy running').
- n) They went *inside inside* ('They went to the interior part').
- o) Those are *simple simple* jobs to do ('Those are very simple jobs to do').
- p) They live *one one* or *two two* ('They live one or two to a room').

Reduplication is mostly used in NE in colloquial contexts. And in the contexts exemplified above, the reduplicatives *small-small*, *fine-fine*, *one-one*, *fast-fast*, *simple-simple*, *three-three* and *big-big* are often heard in the speeches of educated NE users. In general, reduplicatives are more commonly used by the less educated speakers of NE than by educated speakers. The occurrence of reduplicatives in NE stems from the influence of Nigerian languages and Pidgin.

3.3. Double subjects

The use of double subjects is another syntactic feature of NE. This process, which is adopted to emphasize the subject, may involve the use of double pronouns (e.g. *this your/my*, *Me I*) or the pronoun + a modifier/qualifier (e.g. *we children*, *we the poor*).

- a) *Me I* don't have money ('I don't have money').
- b) *Me I* don't know anything about the journey ('I don't know anything about the journey').
- c) *This your* friend is not reliable ('Your friend is not reliable' OR 'This friend of yours is not reliable').

- d) *This your regime* is the worst we have witnessed in recent time ('Your regime is the worst we have witnessed in recent time' OR 'This regime of yours is the worst we have witnessed in recent time').
- e) *We children* were sent to go and play ('We were sent to go and play' OR 'Those of us who were young were sent out to go and play').
- f) *We the poor* are always cheated in this country ('We are always cheated in this country' OR 'Those of us who are poor are always cheated in this country').

The use of double subjects in constructions reflects the colloquial contexts of some of Nigeria's indigenous languages (e.g. Igbo and Yoruba) and Nigerian Pidgin. Its colloquialism lies with the use of redundancy to achieve emphasis. Note the use of double pronouns as subjects in examples (a) to (d) and the use of pronoun + a modifier/qualifier in examples (e) and (f). The structures exemplified in (3.3.) are found in the speech of both educated and less educated users. Although the use of double subjects resembles the use of topicalisation, which is commonly used in British English (e.g. *John Coker, he's to blame*), the two processes are different since the pronoun in topicalisation is in apposition to the noun.

3.4. Pidgin-influenced structures

The strong influence of Pidgin English brings forth several NE structures. Let's examine the following samples:

- a) We work farm ('We are farmers' or 'We work on a farm').
- b) I have maize, yam, *finish* ('I have maize and yam; that is it').
- c) I continue working at farm, *finish* ('I continue to work at the farm; that is it').
- d) We sat down, *finish* ('We sat down; that was it').
- e) We stayed together, ate, *finish* ('We stayed together and ate; that was it').
- f) The Muslims are plenty than the Christians ('The Muslims are more than the Christians').
- g) I don't know book ('I'm not brilliant').
- h) If rice is done you keep it ('Bring down the rice from fire when it is well cooked').

Note the deletion of preposition and determiner in (a), the emphatic use of *finish* as a discourse marker in (b), (c), (d) and (e), the use of *plenty* as a comparative item in (f), translation equivalent in (g), and (h).

3.5. Structures with discourse particles

Several English structures exist in NE with discourse particles, which derive either from the influence of NP or the indigenous language. Discourse particles are frequently used in conversation. Consider the following examples:

- a) You know Kemi *now*! ('You should know Kemi').
- b) I live in Port Harcourt *now*! ('You should know that I live in Port Harcourt').
- c) Wait *now*! ('Please wait').
- d) Tomorrow is your birthday, *abi*? ('Tomorrow is your birthday. Isn't it?').
- e) *Shebi* it was you I gave some money yesterday ('I think it was you I gave some money yesterday')
- f) I won't be there *o* ('I will not be there').
- g) I'm tired of this life *self* ('I'm even tired of this life').
- h) You'll be here tomorrow, *ko*? ('You'll be here tomorrow, won't you?').
- i) You disobeyed me and still went ahead to fight those people, *ba*? ('You disobeyed me and still went ahead to fight those people, didn't you?').
- j) So, it is now confirmed that you were the one who initiated that move against me; *kai*, I'm disappointed ('So, it is now confirmed that you were the one who initiated that move against me; I'm really disappointed').
- k) *Haba*! You should have told me before taking my money ('What! You should have told me before taking my money').
- l) *Sha* me, I have said what I wanted to say ('As for me, I have said all I have to say').
- m) I don't know him *sha* ('Anyway, I don't know him').
- n) I have heard you, *to*! ('OK, I have heard you').
- o) You're the one that stole my money, *to*! ('You're the one that stole my money, right!').
- p) I will deal with that man, *wallahi* ('By God, I will deal with that man').
- q) *Yauwa*! I have seen what I'm looking for ('I'm satisfied that I have seen what I'm looking for').

While 3.5 (a), (b), (c), (f) and (g) have pidgin as their source language, (d), (e), (l) and (m) have Yoruba as their source language. The examples in (h), (i), (j), (k), (n), (o), (p) and (q) are derived from Hausa and/or Fula. All the examples are regularly found in NE-based conversations. In (a), (b) and (c), the discourse particle *now* is used to emphasize the point that what is referred to is not unfamiliar to the listener. In (d), the interjection *abi* is used as a discourse strategy to confirm a piece of information. It may be equivalent to 'Isn't it?' Like *now*, the particle *o* in (f) is usually found in sentence-final position and gives emphasis to

the entire sentence. In addition, *o* signals the emotional involvement of the speaker. Both *ko* in (h) and *ba* in (i) are interrogative markers. *Kai* and *haba* express surprise. *Shebi* is a rhetorical question marker while *yauwa* expresses feeling of satisfaction. Both *sha* and *to* are used to affirm a statement whereas *wallahi* is equivalent to 'honestly' or 'By God'. All the discourse particles discussed above are only used colloquially. Discourse particles are veritable sources of syntactic innovation processes in NE. The structures in (3.5.) can occur in the conversations of both educated and less educated speakers of NE. Although discourse particles are not originally English items, they are innovative in creating NE structures.

3.6. Verbless sentences

Some verbless sentences exist in the discourse of NE speakers. In conversations or exchange of pleasantries, one notices the frequent occurrence of the following verbless sentences:

- a) How? ('How are you?')
- b) How now? ('How are you?')
- c) How things? ('How are things?')
- d) How work? ('How is work?')
- e) How family? ('How is your family?')
- f) How life? ('How is life with you?')
- g) How body? ('How is your body?')
- h) How market? ('How is business?')

It may be argued that the deep structure of the verbless sentences in 3.6. may not be really verbless but the result of a phonological rule in which single consonants (in this case, [z]) are deleted between word boundaries. But at the surface structure, they remain verbless. Although such verbless sentences are more frequently found in the conversation of the less educated speakers of NE, they also occur in the conversations of educated users of NE as a means of expressing intimacy.

3.7. Substitution

Some instances of substitution, which involve the use of English idioms, have been identified as processes of syntactic creation in NE. In all the examples listed below, NE structures are used to replace BE idioms:

- a) They are *two sides of the coin* ('They are two sides of one coin').

- b) He did the work *on his own accord* ('He did the work of his own accord').
- c) I am not surprised that Chike and Andrew are such close friends; they are *birds of the same feather* ('I am not surprised that Chike and Andrew are such close friends; they are birds of a feather').
- d) Dipo, I can't believe that you're now *biting the finger that fed you* ('Dipo, I can't believe that you're now biting the hand that fed you').
- e) The football match is going to be *a child's play* ('The football match is going to be child's play').
- f) I have been busy since morning *cracking my brain* over that question ('I have been busy since morning racking my brain over that question').
- g) You should not *take the law into your hands* ('You should not take the law into your own hands').
- h) *By no stretch of imagination* could anyone trust him ('By no stretch of the imagination could anyone trust him').
- i) And *last but not the least* is the perennial water problem in this state ('And last but not least is the perennial water problem in this state').
- j) He often shouts *on top of his voice* ('He often shouts at the top of his voice').

As a syntactic process, the substitution of idiomatic usage involves three strategies – omission, replacement and insertion. While examples (a), (g) and (h) involve omission of some functional words, examples (e) and (i) concern the insertion of articles. In the same vein, examples (b), (c), (d), (f) and (j) adopt the process of replacement of some words.

4. Conclusion

What the data on syntactic innovation processes in NE shows is the evidence of some aspects of the nativisation of English as a result of the contact of English and indigenous languages and Pidgin. There is also evidence of some influence of the pragmatic use of English in the Nigerian environment. It is true that some features of NE syntax discussed in this paper are shared by other varieties of WAE in particular and other varieties of English elsewhere. This trend suggests a healthy development for the character of new Englishes worldwide. The pedagogical implication of these processes relates to acceptability. Once the "acceptability factor" (Bamgbose 1998: 4) is guaranteed, that is, when innovations become accepted by speakers, the next process will be to codify the new norms in the form of variety-specific grammars and the common grammar of new Englishes. To further aid the codification of these various grammars, there is a great need for comparative studies of the syntax of New Englishes.

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