
FROM LINGUISTIC DIVERGENCE TO LINGUISTIC CONVERGENCE: THE CASE OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN VARIETIES OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA

By

Dr. Maria Helen Ekah

*Department of English,
University of Uyo,
Uyo.*

Abstract

This paper investigated the co-existence of American and British Varieties of English in the Nigerian educational system and its implications on English Language learning in our school system. The paper looked at some lexical choices, spellings, vocabulary and phrasal divergences in these two English varieties. The researcher observes that British spellings of some words are different from American. It is also observed that some concepts which are similar in meaning are expressed using two different words as if they have two different meanings, as in boot and truck, lorry and truck. It is noticed that the use of computer in which American English predominates has introduced spelling forms, vocabulary and certain phrases and sentences which are completely different from the familiar pattern of British English. The investigation reveals that many teachers (of English) are not conversant with the differences so they are as confused as their learners. This research concludes that since the use of computer has come to stay, Nigerians cannot run away from American English. It therefore, advocates a reconciliation and adoption of the two varieties which will, over time, converge into one variety because our strict adherence to British Standard English is pretentious and posing a pedagogic problem in the Nigerian educational system

That English is a global language is not contestable and that British English now has nativised varieties in the countries they are spoken is firmly established. English language which was a language of a community of speakers downtrodden for many centuries by French and Latin, regarded as vernacular during French domination and only spoken by the commoners has assumed global dominance and prominence.

As a result of the antecedents of history, Nigeria uses English as its official language in addition to the other purposes which it serves in the Nigerian environment. English is also spoken in the United States of America and it has some peculiar characteristics which distinguish it from the British English, which is its mother

language and shares common core features. However, many Nigerians have been trained in both United States of America and Britain with each nation having its standards. The graduates from these two countries have been employed in our school system resulting in Nigeria's learners of English being exposed to two different forms of English at the same time. At one class level, the learners are taught by British trained graduates while at another level they are taught by American trained graduates. Teachers of English on either side of the divide justify their use of English, especially, in pronunciation, spellings, and lexical choice. Given that in teaching and learning the teacher is the model of emulation, in this type of scenario whose English should the children adopt – British or American standard English?

The Initial Stage of English in Nigeria

At the advent of English in Nigeria, learners were taught by native speakers most of whom were missionaries. As Taiwo (2005) observed, the standard of English the learners were exposed to then was clearly British. However, after sometime, the missionaries gradually returned to their home country while some died. Consequently, Nigerians took over the teaching profession. The model of English in the 60's was the native speaker's competence which every second language learner aspired to attain. This model of English was labelled Received Pronunciation and propagated as BBC English exported to non-native speakers learning the language.

With the spread of English to many parts of the world and the nativization of English in many countries including Nigeria, BBC correspondents were no longer and are still not wholly Englishmen as it used to be. Their accent, pronunciation and lexical choice no longer conformed completely to native speaker model but tainted with local colour based on the locality of the user and his audience. Consequently, BBC English became adulterated and no longer the model and the ultimate goal in language pedagogy. Consequently, "The practice of gauging the performance of the English as a second language (ESL) learner against the performance of the native speaker" was no longer tenable (Taiwo 2005: 20-21).

Our focus in this paper is not on the nativization of English, which has been richly discussed in (Jowitt, 1991, Bamgbose, 1995; Banjo, 1996; and Udofot, 2003) but on the pedagogic implication of having British and American varieties of English operating at the same time in the same environment and its effect on the Nigerian educational system. It is, therefore, the precarious situation of two super power English operating in the same environment that has prompted this research.

The Issue of Conformity to Standards

American Standard English is not British Standard English, each has its peculiar features in spelling, pronunciation, lexis and structure.

The differences between these two varieties are so conspicuous that one cannot help but regard them as two different classes of English, the different varieties of English which the Nigerian learner has to contend with. Quirk and Widdowson, (1985) have asked whose English should be adopted worldwide- British or American. A close examination of the teaching problems these two English varieties have posed in the Nigerian situation force one to ask the same question whose English should be adopted in Nigeria - British or American. This is due to the fact that these two varieties are used by the teachers and independently said to be the correct form, each with a convincing evidence to support its stance.

This has led us to the issue of correctness. In the Nigerian situation whose English do we use to judge the Nigerian second language learners of English in order to say that their English is good or bad, right or wrong. The problem has gone beyond the question of ownership, model of choice and preference to a hybrid. One is constrained to join Heim (1993: 2) to ask “what is the state of English” and to also adopt his response “No state at all. It is in process”. Indeed, English language in Nigeria from the year 2000 is in process.

In the Nigerian educational system, there are Nigerian, British and American trained teachers and the worldwide web which gives learners access to information in the internet through the computer. The model of English used in the computer is largely American in spellings, lexical choice and sentence structure. As a result, learners who are computer literate and are steadily increasing in number tilt towards American variety of English while Nigerian teacher do not seem to observe that they are grappling with two standard varieties of English.

In the spirit of neo-colonialism where formerly colonised territories are still loyal to their colonial lords, Nigerian trained graduates and their British trained colleagues, insist on British Standard variety even when American English is subtly outstripping it of its dominance.

Divergence between British and American Varieties of English

Divergent features abound between British and American varieties of English. Quirk and Greenbaum (2000:1) hold that what is considered as English is a common core which dominates all the varieties and has “a set of grammatical and other characteristics that are common to all”. Eka (2000:40) argued that for a language “to qualify to be a language variety, the language system must be used by a group (often a substantial group) and must have characteristics which distinguish it from other systems.” He further added that it is important that “each system must have common core features otherwise we would be dealing with separate languages”. The two varieties in focus share common core features from British Standard English with

American variety having substantial distinguishing features to mark it out particularly in its orthographic form, pronunciation, lexis and sentence structure. However, the researcher is not going to consider pronunciation divergencies in this paper.

Orthographic Divergence

Orthography provides the symbols and rules to follow in writing a language (Williamson, 1984) and one of the aspects of orthography is spellings. Spelling is the arrangement of letters of a word in their correct order. Any omission of a letter of a word or wrong insertion of a letter makes the spelling of a word wrong. In the Nigerian situation what constituted spelling errors in the 70's were clearly defined and seemed to have been limited in scope as compared to the new dimensions spelling errors have assumed because of the use of computer. Those aspects of orthography which were taken for granted now constitute areas of difficulty to be tackled by the teachers.

Since the computer is coded in American English, learners are consistently exposed to a variety of English which is different from the one they are generally taught in school. Taiwo (2005) observed that American English subtly eliminates redundant graphemes while Arab- Mogaddam (2001) opined that American English has a shallow orthography whereby spellings of words correspond largely with the pronunciation of such words. British English, on the contrary, has a preponderance of redundant graphemes. The following examples are instances of orthographic divergence between these two varieties:

British	American
calibre	caliber
offence	offense
install	instal
programme	program
speciality	specialty
catalogue	catalog
cheque	check
aluminium	aluminum
colour	color
Favour	favor
Manoeuvre	manoeuvre

Many Nigerian teachers are very familiar with the British spellings of these words and not so much with the American spellings which forces them to mark the later as wrong whenever they appear in learners' scripts. Due to the fact that the second language learners are born in the era of the use of computers, they are more exposed to

From Linguistic Divergence to Linguistic...

American spellings even though their English readers and other text books are mostly written in British English.

Similarly, American English uses single – l in the spelling of certain words while British English uses double – ll as in the following words:

British	American
traveller	traveler
levelling	leveling
signalled	signaled
counselling	counseling
jewellery	jewelery
libellous	libelous
fulfillment	fulfilment

In addition to the above is extreme re-definition of spellings in certain words like *plough* (British) but *plow* (American), *draught* (British) and *draft* (American), *judgement*, acknowledgement (British) and *judgment*, *acknowledgment* (American). The elimination of redundant letters simplifies: spellings in American English and curbs wastage. Williamson (1984) stated that redundant orthography is difficult to read and constitutes one of the reasons so many English words are difficult to read by the learners. Quite often, the leaders are confused about the correct spellings. In instances like *plough* and *plow*, they do not even realise that the words mean the same but are only orthographically divergent.

In addition to the differences listed above, there are also problems posed by lexical divergences between British and American varieties of English. They include;

British	American
trunk	boot
petrol	gas or gasoline
dustbin	trash/garbage can
Vacation	holiday
elevator	lift
truck	lorry
pyjamas	Pajamas
bathroom	restroom
curriculum vitae	resume

There is no meaning difference in each of these pairs of words but, to some learners they are different words with different meanings because of ignorance. Some

Academic Excellence

teachers even have the same problem. Teachers must identify words of this nature and teach their learners.

Syntactic Divergence

Language easily changes its phonology, lexis, vocabulary and meaning but not the grammar, but experience involving British and American English shows that the grammar of English is changing gradually, though subtly in the tactical deletion of inflections in certain words and the omission of prepositions even in certain phrases.

There are also problems related to phrases and, sentences. They are so contentious that students and teachers debate about the correct form even when both of them are the same except that they are variant forms of English as in:

British

cover letter
passed on
single-handed
help to train
fill out a form
He arrived on Monday.

American

Covering letter
passed away
single-handedly
help train
fill in a form
He arrived Monday.

It is interesting to observe that so many teachers do not observe these variations in order to bring them to the attention of their learners. It is more difficult to think that these sources of errors will be eliminated in the near future because of the widespread of American variety of English through the computer and the fact that facilitators of English language learning, the teachers are also grappling with the same difficult. During the millennium development goals 2010 workshop for teachers in Akwa Ibom State, the researcher interacted with the teachers to test their knowledge in the differences between British and American English, 80% of them were also as confused as their learners on the divergences between British and American English and the acceptable model.

The Likely Outcome

Our principal concern is not so much on the linguistic divergence in the two varieties of English under discussion as in the pedagogic implication on the teachers, students and the educational system in Nigeria as well as the likely outcome of the divergence. Developments in ICT have brought about concepts of education in which learning has shifted from teacher – oriented and teacher-centred to learner-oriented and learner-centred education (Bala, 2004 as cited in Taiwo, 2005). Learners are now sourcing for information beyond the limits and imaginations of their teachers through

From Linguistic Divergence to Linguistic...

mobile phones and the internet which expose them to English beyond what they see, hear and use in the school environment.

Uwadiogwu and Oladeji (2012) have observed that education in this ICT age is no longer based on the resourcefulness of the teacher but on learning activities of the learner. With ICT, the learner drags the teacher along rather than the teacher dragging the learner along as it was previously. The teacher is, therefore, challenged to be well grounded in issues relating to ICT to earn the respect of the learners in which American variety of English is a part. Though native speakers of English would wish that English is not adulterated with idiosyncratic, regional and dialectal variants, but English has been very heavily globalised out of native speakers' control. As such, it is no longer possible for the native speakers to determine the twists and turns English has undergone because English is no longer homogeneous but heterogeneous.

Nigerian teachers of English must observe the defining differences in these two varieties of English which co-habit in the Nigerian environment in order to address the issue of correctness or else learners will continue to be penalised for errors they have not committed. Our teachers need a re-orientation about these two varieties of English and the need to relay such information to the learners. Udofot (2000:3) observed that "English is the language of computer programming and the internet" and by implication, it is the language that controls world affairs and Nigeria cannot be illiterate in it, and by extension be illiterate in American English.

Since English is the language of education in Nigeria, it must be devoid of every form of confusion to achieve learning goals. As the language of global communication, English interconnects nations and languages. As a result of the fact that English is so well globalised there is the need to change our approach to what determines correctness in spellings, lexis and structure as it relates to British and American English. There is also need to change our attitude to global English by recognising that two varieties of English now dominate the education space in Nigeria even though common core features seem to becloud our perception to observe this. Nigerians have to incorporate these two varieties because they are herewith us and we have no choice than to use them. Nigerians should isolate those aspects of these two varieties of English that challenge us for close study. To run away from American English and stick tenaciously to British English in this ICT age is pretentious because Nigerians cannot run away from the computer and American variety of English since it is the language of computer programming.

Conclusion

English in Nigeria is, indeed, in a process. A new form of English is evolving and in the next decade or two we are going to have a hybrid of British and American

English. The outcome is going to be a linguistic convergence of British and American varieties of English in Nigeria dissolving into one language variety learnt and taught to our second language learners.

Recommended Solutions

Teachers of English in Nigeria including those teaching other subjects should acknowledge the presence and strong encroachment of American English in the educational system and bring them to the attention of the learners. The seeming ineptitude towards American English should stop. Teachers should highlight areas of differences and not preferences. Even though, Nigeria like other African countries previously under the British rule still hold strong ties with Britain and preserves most of the colonial legacies like the English Language, but the advent of computer encoded in American English has challenged the dominance of British variety of English in our school system. Nigerians can no longer hold on to a monolithic British English should but adopt a cohabitation of British and American English in the Nigerian school system.

References

- Bamgbose, A. (1995). English in the Nigerian environment. In A. Bamgbose, A. Banjo & A. Thomas (Ed.) (pp. 9-26), *New Englishes: A West African Perspective* Ibadan: Muson.
- Banjo, A. (1996). *Making a virtue of necessity: an overview of the English Language in Nigeria*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Ekah, D. (2000). *Issues in Nigerian English*. Uyo: Scholars Press.
- Heim, M. (1993). *The Metaphysics of virtual reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jowitt, D. (1991), *Nigerian English Usage: An Introduction*. Lagos: Longman.
- Quirk, R & Widdowson, H. G. (1985). *English in the World: teaching and learning the language and literatures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quirk R. & Greenbaum, S. (2000). *A university grammar of English*, Singapore: Longman.
- Taiwo, S. (2005). Linguistic divergence in British/American varieties of English and its implications for ELT. In M. Olateju & L. Oyeleye (Eds.) (pp. 15-21), *Perspectives on language and literature* Ibadan: Heinemann.

From Linguistic Divergence to Linguistic...

Udofot, I. (2003). Nativisation of the English Language in Nigeria: A cultural and linguistic renaissance. *Journal of Nigerian English and Literature*, 4, 42-52.

Uwadiogwu, I. O. & Oladeji, A. D. (2012) Information and Communication Phobia: A challenge to technology teacher education in Nigeria. *Academic Scholarship Journal*, 6 (1) 113-119.

Williamson, K. (1984) *Practical Orthography in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Heinemann.