

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE EMERGING NIGERIAN ENGLISH AND FUNCTIONALITY

Nnenna O. Oke (Mrs.)

Abstract

The interest of this paper is centred on a variety of English Language usage that has gained grounds within and outside the circles of the Nigerian educated elite. Quite different as it is from the disjointed grammatical and semantic usages of the Pidgin English, this variety, as we have noted achieves functionality while still obeying the basic rules of English Language usage. It is therefore worth our attention.

The English Language in Perspective

I feel that the English Language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Chinua Achebe).

The use of national language as a world lingua franca, many people believe, is the only realistic means of breaking the foreign language barrier. Historically, the Latin language had risen and spread as a medium of education in Western Europe in the Middle Ages only to be overtaken by French and later by English. Many factors contribute to the gradual spread of a language namely, political and military might, economic power, religious influences etc.

English language is the present occupant of this coveted seat of a world language. David Crystal (1987) in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* writes that for English "there are few competitors. Several other languages have an important local role as a lingua franca but no comparable international level of use". Statistically, a conservative estimate has it that mother tongues speakers of English Language have now reached 300 million; a further 300 million use English as a second language; and further 100 million use it fluently as a foreign language. This is an increase of 40 percent since the 1950s. More radical estimates, which include speakers with a lower level of language fluency and awareness have suggested that the overall total these days is well in excess of 1,000 million. This wild fire like spread of the English language is encapsulated in the observation of a visitor who returned to China after 20 years. He writes "in 1959, everyone was carrying a book of the thoughts of Chairman Mao; today, everyone is carrying a book of Elementary English". Following are other comments of people from different lands and climes concerning the English language.

- i. "When I finish learn English rny pay as Secretary will be increase (SIC) nearly ten times" Egyptian trainee Secretary).
- ii. "My company plans big deals with Arabic world, none of us speak (SIC) Arabic, and they do not know Japanese. All our plans and meeting are in English" (Japanese Businessman).
- iii. "After I learned English, I felt I was in tough with the international world for the very first time (Nigerian teacher).
- iv. "If I want to keep up to date with the latest techniques and products, I must certainly maintain my English very strongly" (Indian doctor).
- v. "Nearly every in Denmark speaks English, if we didn't there wouldn't be anyone to talk to" (Danish University Students).

Given the background of the above comments, no serious community in the comity of nations can afford to neglect the English language in the scheme of things. In the effort to keep up with communicating in this all-important international language, a number of varieties have continued to emerge in different localities. Native speakers of the English language are also known to have their own dialectical varieties and they are in a privileged position of easily assimilating ideas expressed in it. The English language has continued to acquire new spoken and consequently written varieties that are completely peculiar to each area it spreads to. These peculiar usages as they emerge gradually permeates all walks of life to the extent that such varieties become to the such a group a symbol of identity. The American variety being the most highly developed and consequently documented variety

now has a separate identity as American English existing side by side with British. This paper seeks to draw our attention to a variety that is purely Nigerian in outlook and which can boldly stand as Nigerian English. The variety of our interest is totally different from outright Pidgin English (which has its own historical background) and other traditional oral nuances of the native languages which some of our literary artists like Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara had employed in their work. By Nigerian English we mean those expressions that are typically Nigerian and which develop as a result of the user's constant interaction with the second language.

Nigerian English and Functionality

This section of the paper will examine to what extent Nigerian English is serving the purpose of its users. Our approach will be to interpret the Nigerian based expressions in the light of their English equivalents and decide on which is preferable given the prevailing circumstances.

Nigerian English has emerged as a result of the Nigerian user's unconscious effort to capture, in real terms, their intended expressions within the Nigerian context. These expressions are not only meaningful but also do not injure the grammatical structure of the core language. While the puritanists believe that it is wrong to re-mould British idioms to suit private purposes, the liberals think that this is admissible from the sociolinguistic point of view. To these arguments Nwachukwu Agbada (1998) adds that "at the moment, it is premature to say whether or not those expressions are wrong or correct English usage since they are still in the process of evolution". In the opinion of this paper, Nigerian English has come of age and now deserves attention. With very close examination one will certainly identify the examples that follow as expressions that have sprung up in Nigerian environment and with roots in the Nigerian soil.

1. The winners of that context really *tried*,
2. We shall invite all the *big men* to our function.
3. *I am sorry* about the calamity that befell you.
4. The way he carries on with *backhand business* is just too much.
5. We will not accommodate *African time* in our meetings.
6. She is the President of the *market women* Association.
7. I went to *cut my hair*.
8. I don't want those people *to stand at my back*.
9. They were asked *to dress up* for the function.
10. *Go well*, I'll see you when you return.

The underlined sections of the sentences are the ones under discussion.

In the Nigerian context the meanings as well as the correctness of the above examples are not in doubt. Their usage is not new among the educated elite and the expressions have continued to thrive in spite of the fact that the owners of the language would rather prefer the following substitutes.

1. Did very well.
Performed well in place of 'tried' etc.
The reason for the preference being that the word 'try' in British English means attempting to do something but without success while in the Nigerian context it means that one has put in his best and succeeded at it.
2. Important personalities in place of "big men".
3. Accept my sympathy in place of "I'm sorry".
4. Backhand business in place of "behind the door deals".
5. Lateness in place of "African time".
6. Women traders in place of "market women".
7. Hair cut in place of "cut my hair".
8. Behind me in place of "at by back".
9. Get dressed in place of "dress up".
10. Good-bye in place of "Go well".

(Note that "see" could also have its connotations in the Nigerian context). These examples and all others in the same category have been found to serve the educated user's purpose perfectly. They have blended so well that majority of their users do not even realize

that something now is happening. It must be stated here that this Nigerian variety of English is as valid as it necessary if a meaningful use of the language is to be sustained. When the Indian writer Rajoo stated that:

"The tempo of Indian Life must be infused into our English expressions even as the tempo of the American or Irish Life has gone into the marking of theirs".

He was amply making a case for the varieties of English. These varieties have continued to grow, howbeit, at different rates among different people with the American variation topping the list.

Other Varieties of English

Varieties of a language do exist as a result of recognizable difference in intended meaning, pronunciation and even spelling. Amongst some inherent differences among the users of the English language the most documented and widely used variety is the American English. American English which now has its own identity does not only differ from British English in spellings as in.

American English

Favor
Center
Check
Neighbor
Program

British English

Favour
Centre
Cheque
Neighbour
Programme etc.

It also differs in some of the lexical items. For instance, the British magazine *The Economist* use words such as 'petrol' 'lift' and 'interval'¹ while the American *Time Magazine* will rather use gas, elevator and intermission for the same expressions. Noah Webster et al take the credit in the standardization and documentation of American English. Following the revolution of the 19th century he undertook, to bring into being, a standardized American version of English for use in the new nation. Since then, Americans have preferred to compose their own dictionaries and grammar thus maintaining distinct American standard Dictionaries that indicate regional, colloquial, formal, informal and innovative definitions and usages.

Varieties of a language, English in particular, will continue to exist for as long as that language continues to be used by different people in different times and places.

Conclusion

This paper would have achieved its purpose if Nigerian English is recognized as a legitimate variety of English. This is because it comes in handy in expressions where the British variety would have been deficient in supplying the necessary tools.

It is interesting to note that in spite of these varieties, the core English language is still in place and acts as a springboard for the others to take off. It is for the educated and controlled emergence of these varieties that Randolph Wuirk (1982) advocates what he calls 'nuclear English' which according to him, would provide "a core structure and vocabulary from within the range of acceptable English". He goes further to add that it would eliminate all dispensable parts while taking up more straightforward alternatives.

The issue of language and expression sometimes do normally go beyond more expressions. They carry with them the totality of the human person in terms of how he would prefer to perceive and express his thoughts. An educated user should therefore have the freedom to exist and partake of all that is at his disposal in a linguistic environment provided that he is seen to obey the general set down rules of the language. One can make bold to say that the continued existence of English as a world language will depend on the survival of the varieties for in the words of T.S. Eliot "last year's words belong to last year's language and next year's words await another voice".

Bibliography

Achebe, C. (June, 1994). *The Role of the Writer in a New Nation*. *Nigeria Magazine* NO. 81.

Agbada, N. (1998). *Correct English*. Enugu: John Jacob's Classic Publishers Ltd.

Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language*. Cambridge; University Press.

Mittins, W.H. et al (1970). *Attitudes to English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1981).

Oluikpe, B.O.A. (1981). *Use of English for Higher Education*. Onitsha: Africana Publishers Ltd.

Quirk, R.; and Greenbaum, S.A. (1973). *A University Grammar of English*. England: Longman.

Trudgill, P. (1983). *Sociolinguistics* 2nd Edu. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Wood, F.T. (1962). *Current English Usage*. London: Macmillan.