Abstract
This paper titled “issues, problems and solutions in English and Igbo suprasegmental features: A Contrastive Analysis” examines comparatively the suprasegmental features of English and Igbo which have been engendered by the perceivable standards of linguistic performance often characteristic of certain levels of education of Igbo speakers of English Language. The phenomenon that has made this possible is the features of the pronunciation of English among Igbo users of English that was observed. A tape recorder was used to ascertain the difference in performance between Igbo speakers of English and the British native speaker used as the control. Also, a spoken prose was used to assess the performance of the three groups. (Primary, Secondary and tertiary education). The analytical procedures were experimental perceptual and statistical using functionalism as propounded by Halliday (1978-1985). In this paper, the researcher shows the point that as a speaker moves up the ladder of quality of our English usage the more standardized his/her pronunciation would be.

Vowels and consonants are referred to as segmental sounds because of the possibility of identifying them as discrete sound segments with individual phonetic and phonological characteristics.
There are other phonological components of English such as rhythm, stress and intonation, which cannot be broken up into discrete units of sounds like vowels and consonants. These components function within larger units of utterances and are referred to as suprasegmentals (Akere1987)
Ladefoged (2006) describes suprasegmental features as “those aspect of speech that involves more than single consonants or vowels”. He is of the opinion that the principal suprasegmental features are stress, length, tone and intonation.

Fromkin Rodman and Hyams (2011) identify length, pitch and stress as prosodic or suprasegmental features. According to them, “they are features over and above the segmental values such as place or manner of articulation.....”.

From the above expositions, suprasegmental features are stress, pitch-tone intonation, length, rhythm as well as syllable. This paper therefore examines comparatively the suprasegmental features of English and Igbo.

Research Procedure

The research sample comprises twenty Igbos of varied educational backgrounds drawn from Primary, Secondary and tertiary education. Education in English is used as the main criterion for stratification and a native (British) speaker who served as control. The sample was grouped into three categories: group A consisted of those who have studied English at the primary level; group B was made up of those who studied English at the secondary level and group C consisted of those who have had or were in the process of having tertiary education. All the groups had training in the pronunciation of English.

The control was a native (British) English speaker who was born and brought up in England. He has a clearly distinguishable British public school accent though he has lived and worked in Nigeria for fifteen years.

All the levels spoke on the topic: Life Discouragement for four minutes guided by the passage adapted from Azuka Monyei’s Emenike My Hero to read:

“Emenike painstakingly traversed the bush paths where he set his traps, the threat of rain and impending nightfall never deterred him. When he was done, he discovered that his traps had caught grass cutters and seven pouched rats many of which were various stages of decomposition. He threw away one grass cutter and three pouched rats, which were in very bad shape and went home with others. His trip home was one he made in the company of countless flies attracted by rotten meat.

Emenike was confident that he would transform the rest of the animals to edible delicacy. He knew his mother never ran short of hot, red pepper which decomposing animals were spiced with to make them edible.

On his way home, Emenike made a mental calculation of the monetary value the animals would have attracted had he met them in good shape. He was convinced that a quarter of a term’s school fees would have been realized from their sale. He held himself responsible for succumbing to induced stress from Okosisi, which rendered him an emotional wreck.” (p: 43)
A tape recorder was used to ascertain the differences in performance between the experimental levels and the control and the latter to compare the performance of the three levels. The tape recorder productions were replayed and the productions of suprasegmentals features were noticed and contrast with the productions of the control. In addition, the durations of each syllable of the members of the groups and the control were calculated. The pitch extractions of the second level as produced two informants were done.

We observed that some speakers who are more motivated than others may perform better within a given space of time. Also the members who came from educated homes where English is used are likely to perform better than those from illiterate homes where English is spoken because the parents are from different linguistic backgrounds.

The extent of exposure to formal English learning was used as a yardstick to have a common criterion of assessment of the members of the group. Most of the members were taught English by teachers who are Nigerians. It is obvious that a single control may not be enough for far-reaching conclusions but since the interest of the paper is on contrastive analysis of English and Igbo suprasegmental features, more attention is paid in the analysis and conclusions to the groups.

Findings and Discussion

Suprasegmentals Features

The principal phonetic correlates of the more linguistic aspects of prosody and prosodic structure are traditionally thought to be the dynamic patterns of pitch-accent, duration and loudness, although vowel quality and possible spectral tilt are also phonetic correlates of stress in some languages. The three suprasegmentals parameters, pitch, loudness and duration are both overlaid on, and influenced by, the less dynamic substratum of voice quality as determined by the state of the vocal tract. These dimensions of the speech signal, interacting with each other and with the segmental structure, are fundamental to our perception of emotion, attitude and other such information conveyed in speech.

Intonation

The importance of English intonation, both as an area of difficulty for the foreign learner and as a challenge to theory and description has been acknowledged in a number of classic studies. Among the works prompted by the needs of learners are Pike’s outline of American English intonation (1945) and treatments of British intonation by O’Connor and Arnold (1973) and Halliday (1970). Pike (1945, pp.3-18) includes a survey of work prior to his own and crystal (1969) is a detailed account of English which spans a wide range of prosodic features and pays thorough attention to relevant work both inside and outside linguistics. More general accounts of intonation
are Lieberman (1967), Bolinger (1972)- which is a collection of paper that includes extracts from works mentioned above as well as treatments of languages other than English and Cruttenden (1997). In recent years, several researchers have turned their attention to the role of intonation in discourse: this perspective is reflected in, for example, Brazil et al. (1980) Brown et al. (1980) and Wichmann (2000).

Intonation is often described, somewhat impressionistically, as a matter of “musical features’ or speech ‘tunes or melodies’ (O’Connor and Arnold 1973, P.1). While this may be awful nontechnical pointer, it is sometimes linked with a conception of intonation as something superimposed upon the intrinsic meaning of words themselves, conveying the speakers’ attitude rather than any fundamental meaning. It is in fact a crucial part of the English Language carrying important semantic and discourse and/or pragmatic functions. These functions may be attitude in the sense that they express, for instance, definiteness or tentativeness, but these meanings are no more superimposed or extrinsic than other functional options such as whether to ask a question or make a statement or whether to qualify a statement by including the word ‘probably’ or ‘possibly’

This concept of intonation is narrowed to what we observed in our research. We noticed that members of the group had more intonation phrases than the control in the spoken prose for instance, whereas the control had up to seven (7). The groups also showed an inclination towards using the falling and the rising tones (unidirectional tones) in both in spoken prose and the spontaneous productions. Bidirectional tones were more frequent in the production of the control. Among the 10 intonation phrases used by the control (7) were falls and (3) were rise-fall. The highest margin was observed in level three where there was a total of 20 extra intonation phrases while level two and one had a total of 7 and 5 each. This shows that level three used more intonation phrase than level two and one.

In terms of distribution of tones in the spoken prose, it was noticed that of the 448 intonation tones used in three by all the fifteen members, 305 (68.1%) were falls 59 (13.20%), 4(0.8%) were fall-rise. Level two produced a total of 432 tunes, 353 (78.7%) of which were falls; 55(12.2%) were rise; 40(8.9%) were rise-fall and no one featured the fall-rise of the 431 tones produced by 15 members in group one; 370 (82.5%) were falling tones, 49(10.9%) were rising tones and 33(7.3%) were fall-rises while no members in the group used the rise-fall, a tone that was not also used by the control. This observation shows that in the three groups of Igbo speakers of English, the most frequently used information tone was the rise in group two and one. Though the fall formed the bulk of the tones, the rise and the fall-rise featured in the performances of group three. Group two followed with a decreasing frequency of occurrence of the rise and fall-rise. A summary of the performance of the members as regards intonation is shown in the table below:
The table above reveals a significant difference between the performances of the groups that make up Igbo speakers and the native speaker’s of English in terms of intonation in the spoken prose. The sum of the ranks for group three was 238, that of group two was 192 while group one recorded a rank sum of 93. Variety three was therefore the one that shows the greatest divergence from a native English speaker in terms of intonation. The group also shows the widest diversity in the choice of tones.

**Pitch – Accent**

It was noticed that the accented patterns of the members of the experimented group in many words and in connected speech were different from those of the control. In some words, certain syllables were accented in positions other than those accented by the control. For instance, in the words ‘painstakingly’ and ‘rotten’, most of members had ‘painstakingly’ or pains’ta’kingly’ and ‘rot’ten while other control had ‘painstakingly and ‘rotten. Our subjects also revealed a tendency to have more accented syllables than the control in the spoken prose. In the spoken prose passage for example, the control had a total of 178 accented syllables out of the 259 syllables in the passage. Out of the 45 members, the member whose performance was close to that of the control had 180 accented syllables, while the one whose performance was farthest from the control’s had 238 accented syllables (178 accented syllables more than the control) featuring a tendency to accent almost every syllable in the passage.

There were differences in the performances of the groups. In Group three the highest number of additional syllables was 14, which is 7.9% more than that of the
control. The highest number of additional accented syllables recorded in group two was 21, 11.8% higher than that of the control. Group one recorded the highest difference from the control’s performance (between 30 and 120 additional accented syllables). This was 98% higher than the number the control had. The test revealed that the group performance of group three, though it was the closest to the control’s performance was significantly different from the performance of the control as seen from the sum of the difference (O-E) which was 100 and rank of difference which was 448.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to describe the features of pronunciation of English among the Igbos as observed in the productions of selected Igbo speakers of English. In the analytical and statistical, it has been shown that with the supra-segmental phenomena, a tendency to have a proliferation of accented syllables resulting from non-reduction of vowels was identified. This features of the Igbos performance is shown to cut across different groups and to be significantly different from the performance of the British native speaker used as the control. As regards intonation, the characteristic feature of Igbos pronunciation identified includes a tendency to have more intonation phrases.

References


Issues, Problems and Solutions in English and Igbo Suprasegmental Features: A Constrastive Analysis


