
**SYNTACTIC VARIATIONS, COMMUNICATION AND
INTELLIGIBILITY IN STANDARD NIGERIAN ENGLISH**

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Abstract

This paper works on the conception that the English language provides interconnectivity between communities and persons in the world as a global village and men can enhance this global interconnectivity through cooperation and understanding in the study and appreciation of English as a Global Language (EGL). The globally appreciated interdependence of people in virtually all aspects of human concern is greatly powered by language use, especially English language. The fact that English language is used by more

people than the native speakers calls for reappraisal of its status in syntax-related variations in other regions of the world because one can not conveniently say that the English which left England many years ago is the same English written and spoken today. This development has led to the emergence of many varieties of English technically referred as “New English”. A number of syntax-related variants in English have been identified by scholars and there is a consensus that these variations are not easily extricated from the syntactic devices of the background languages. Variation, therefore, has a cultural affinity and values, one of which is that the variants do not affect or disturb communication and intelligibility. This is why scholars have variously been referring to the English language in use today globally as “a multi-coloured one language”. This paper calls on teachers of English to teach the syntactic norms of the native speakers but at the same time, should lead their students to the syntactic variants of other peoples and cultures as the universal standard of EGL so as to enable the learners to appreciate these variants as part of the necessary process of global intelligibility of English.

Introduction

‘grammar’. Writers such as Dryden of the later half of 17th century was said to have complained of the ‘barbarity’ of the English tongue, by which he meant the absence of ‘grammar’ in the form of set rules which were to have been patterned after the Latin grammar of the day, (cf. Boadi, 1981). Today, English is used by more speakers than its native speakers. This development has called for a reassessment of the status of English. The rate at which English spreads has brought a number of consequences upon it. Its status has changed so considerably that it can no longer conveniently be referred to as the language of England.

English has justifiably undergone a metamorphosis, a nativization characterizing the different cultures of the world, (cf. Udonata, 2004). The nativization process, normally, will take some time before the full emergence of the new variety. Nigerian English can not all of a sudden be said to have evolved all that is required for its grammar, as a settled rule or an established standard. That is to say that Nigerian English presently, has restricted register which varies according to use. It is an agreed fact that the Nigerian user of English speaks and writes the way he does, not only because of the influence of the written and spoken words but also because he, in the main, transfers to English the language habits or devices of his first language (L1) at all the linguistic levels.

Therefore, the phonological, semantic and of course, the syntactic imports of the background language which before now were different from those of English constitute the variations in these various levels of linguistic studies. According to Eka (2005), English has diverged because of environmental factors which affect its operations in the new environment:

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In addition to borrowing, two factors have generally been identified as being explications for the divergence of English these are spread and nativization. The English language has spread to nearly all parts of the world. Wherever it goes and settles down for a considerable length of time, it is usually known to acquire the local colour of its new environment. (Eka 2005:31)

It is the 'local colour' which influences the status of English language written and spoken there since it no longer maintains its original status. The English that emerges from this speech community is completely a different variety from the English that came into that community at the initial stage.

In the words of Adekunle, M. (1979)

"Syntactic or structural variation in this case, will be regarded as a modification of the syntax of English which does not alter it out of shape or adversely affect intelligibility. This can be examined under three

Morphological/Lexical Variations

One major variation worthy of note at this level is that the adjective which has three degrees: positive, comparative and superlative in the SBE usage appears to have mainly two degrees of comparison i.e. the positive and the comparative in the SNE usage. Thus, we have such expression as:

1a. Joe is ***the tallest*** of the ***two of them***. (SNE) 1b. Joe is ***the taller*** of the ***two of them***. (SBE)

2a. This is ***the best*** of the ***two ideas*** (SNE) 2b. This is ***the better*** of the ***two ideas*** (SBE)

A very interesting aspect of this study is the discovery of some strange features that are borne out of coinages. In this study, the researcher is treating coinages as words or phrases that are non-existence or strange in the SBE lexicon but are very effective in effecting communication in the SNE norm. Eight out of the items isolated for discussion contain features of coinages.

The four essay questions administered on the informants gave room for each respondent to show ability by constructing sentences to reflect group structures in language usage. The results however, revealed that most of the respondents did not find it easy to construct sentences that were devoid of problems with the various groups, while a great majority of the informants still found it difficult to part with the problems arising from the background languages. Again, let us look at these:

3. The car, / ***capsided*** / ***totally after*** / the crashing.

S p A C

4. The newly receive suitor /***drink*** / cigarret / ***greatily daily***.

S P C A
 5. The spokesman / spoke / to us / bluntfully also carefully.

S P C A

6. *Wrongful* drivers/ *drives*/ the long tankers/ *muchly* too rough.

S P C A

Tomori (1977) described morphology, asserting that Morphology is the study of the rules governing the formation of words in a language.

From the corpus of data, it is found that a great majority of the informants were identified with problems arising from allomorphic variation- a practice whereby the addition of the ‘S’ element to a word in the English orthography does not mean anything more than the formation of plural at the word level- whether noun or verb, while the absence of the ‘S’ element only means singular. The results also show that at the word level, most of the informants flouted the morphological processes of prefixation and suffixation known in SBE such that most of the morphemes are formed into potential words or coinages as are allowed by the phonotactic system of the English words. For instance:

7. My *friendshipness* / have made / a fool of me.

S p c

8. You / have to obey / Daddy/ *uncomplainingly* with *unbendability* for serious issues.

S P C A

9. The police / asked / me / *a trickish* question.

S P C C

10. The *delayance* of the burial / is caused / by the police.

S P C

11. We/ have enjoyed/ sixteen *several* years of friendship/ before/ we/ parted/ from each other.

S p C A S P C

Item 3, for instance, has coinage in the verbal group ‘*capsided*’. This word is strange in the SBE lexicon and from the context it is used, one easily realizes that it is a morphological error committed by the informant. The correct choice would be ‘*capsized*’ to make the nominal and the verbal groups appear thus:

The car/capsized/

S P

Error of this nature is almost always identified with varieties 2 and 3 educated users of Nigerian English, for they still use ‘*capside*’ in place of ‘*capsize*’ whenever they wish

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to refer to a situation where a vehicle or boat ‘*turns over*’, ‘*tumbles*’ and or ‘*somersaults*’.

In item 6 again, the rankshifted adjectival group ‘*wrongful drivers*’ is a strange coinage derived from the root ‘*-wrong*’ + *ful*, thereby coining out another adjective ‘*wrongful*’ from the existing one ‘*wrong*’. The case is the same with ‘*much*’ which provides the base for the suffix ‘*-ly*’ for ‘*muchly*’ to be obtained and so may be regarded as potential words. Again, the word ‘*bluntfully*’ is a rankshifted adverbial group derived from the root ‘*blunt*’. Many of such coinages are in the lexicon of the educated Nigerian English and very effective in communication.

In item 7, for instance, the word ‘*friendshipness*’ is another noun formed from the already derived noun ‘*friendship*’ from the base ‘*friend*’. The word now passes through the base thus:

Base	1 st derived noun	Newly derived noun
<i>Friend</i>	<i>friendship</i> (SBE)	<i>friendshipness</i> (ENE)

Therefore, ‘*friendshipness*’ as a newly coined noun is suggestive of the extent or depth to which one is in friendship thereby contributing to the addition of a new form of derived meaning and usage from the word ‘*friend*’.

In item 8, we have the formation ‘*unbend*’+ *ability*. It is a combination of both prefix ‘*un-*’ and suffix ‘*ability*’ from the base ‘*bend*’ which is a verb as we can see:

Base	Prefix/Class Base	Derived word/Class
<i>bend</i> (Verb)	<i>un-bendable</i> (Adj)	<i>unbendability</i> (Noun)

From the morphological process, it is clear that the verb ‘*bend*’ has ‘*unbend*’ and ‘*unbendable*’ as adjective and then ‘*unbendability*’ as a noun, which is suggestive of the ‘*the impossibility of attempting to bend*’. This item again is of interest to this study as it contributes to the enlargement of the vocabulary of the Standard Nigerian English. More so, the morpheme ‘*complain*’ has again added a new entry into the Standard Nigerian English repertoire as it is possible to derive other word forms from the base thus:

Prefix/class	Word/Base	Suffix derived/class
<i>uncomplain</i> (Adj)	<i>complain</i> (N/V)	<i>uncomplainingly</i> (Adv)

This entry has been in use and has its own meaning which is suggestive of ‘strict obedience without any complains to an instruction or order’.

Another coinage ‘*trickish*’ occurs in item 9. It is mispronounced from the word ‘*trick*’ > *tricky* > *trickier* > *trickiest* in the superlative form almost always used by *Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction, Volume 10 No. 1, May, 2015, ISSN: 2276 - 9684*

Nigerian English users of varieties 2, 3 and most of them in variety 4 such as professionals, publishers, journalists, broadcasters and some university dons with bias in the sciences mostly use the word '**trickish**' instead of '**tricky**' in their daily communication with people during conversation and with the students they teach. The morphological process involved here is derivational thus:

Base	suffix	derived word	derived word
<i>trick</i> (N/V)	<i>-ish</i>	<i>trickish</i> (Adj)ENE	<i>tricky</i> (Adj) SBE

This word is suggestive of a person or animal being full of tricks, but in the SBE sense, it means '**being tricky**'.

In item 10, another strange occurrence is '**delayance**' derived suffixation from the base '**delay**' (n/v) by the addition of '**-ance**' to an existing noun/verb '**delay**' to have another noun '**delayance**' which is suggestive of a '**a period of time when an action has to wait due to one problem or the other that slows it down or makes it late**'

The above representations go a long way to agree with Eka (1996) that:

The phonotactic system of the English words has shown that such words do not actually occur in English but are not prevented from occurring by the combinatorial requirements of the language, hence, they are said to be potential words and are combinatorially possible... The nonnative user of English takes advantage of this provision by introducing new words and imposing various meanings on the existing English words in order to foster a smooth flow of communication.

Pleonasm or Superfluous Expressions

Expressions that are superfluous tend to depart from the native speaker's norm and so constitute a variation at the syntactic level of this analysis. The first superfluous expressions commonly referred to as **pleonasm** by linguists have been discovered in item 11. In item 11 for instance, the adjective '**Several**' means '**more than a few, but not very many**' in BrE context. But to educated Nigerian English users of varieties 2 and 3, it means '**many**' and most often, the use of '**several**' to denote '**many**' has cut across the ethnolinguistic boundaries of the Nigerian languages. Therefore, the expression:

'We have enjoyed sixteen several years of friendship before we parted from each other', is functionally determined with two main clauses and one subordinate clause, though not in line with the SBE norm, is an acceptable usage to Nigerian English users because communication has taken place.

Another of such expression is found in item 5, where the informant uses '**bluntfully also carefully**' in adverbial group. The informant **drivers**' occurs at the

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nominal group and 'muchly too well' at the adverbial group may have wanted to say how 'blunt and careful' at the adjectival group but has rankshifted to the adverbial group for purpose of emphasis 'that even though the spokesman was blunt in his speech, yet he was careful at the same time'.

Again, in item 6, the expression '**wrongful**' are superfluous apart from being derogatory and emphatic respectively. '**Wrongful drivers**' is suggestive of the extent or depth to which certain group of drivers sink into perpetrating wrong activities whereas '**muchly too well**' is a polite strategy for being emphatic on a speech act by most educated Nigerian English users of varieties 2 and 3. The adjunct, apart from being unEnglish in the BrE usage has a communicative function of registering contentment and satisfaction on the part of the user in spoken Nigerian English usage. Also, the informant uses '**muchly**' to modify the existing modifier '**too**' of the adjective, '**well**' to show the extent to which '**wrongful drivers**' drive long tankers well.

In item 7, the expression, '**my friendshipness**' in the nominal group is superfluous. The informant may have wanted to express regret about the relationship and so went to a level of personifying '**friendship**' by adding the suffix '**-ness**' thereby forming another noun from the existing one in order to drive home his feeling of regret.

Therefore, these expressions are useful and of interest to this study because new structures at the group level have emerged and contribute to the enlargement of the repertoire of the Standard Nigerian English syntax.

Variation in Words

12a. Josephine is my **lover** (SBE).

12b. John/Josephine is my **boyfriend/girlfriend** (SNE)

13a. This is my **Father/mother** (SBE). 13b. This is my **dad/mum** (SNE).

14a. I got a **missive** from her today (SBE) 14b. I got a **letter** from her today (SNE)

15a. Alice went out with her **mate** (SBE).

15b. Alice went out with her **colleague/friend** (SNE)

According to Adekunle, M.A.(1979:32),

Words can be classified into content and function words. Content words-Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs-are many and always increase in number. They are easy targets of influence by local languages. When local words are borrowed into English, they may not adapt to the regular pattern of other words especially in respect of pluralization if they are nouns. This will give a slightly different pattern to construction in which they are used.

On the other hand, the function words like the prepositions, articles and conjunctions which help to indicate relationship among words and larger structural

units in an utterance are usually resistant to modification or change. They can not be omitted without making the utterance sound unusual. The only variation possible here is where they are optional and variation may involve omitting them or the use of two instead of one as it is in American usage.

Word Order Variation

The Nigerian bilingual mostly speaks English as second language (L2) with errors from the (L1) or background language. This is because the Nigerian child who is out to learn a new language according to Lado (1951):

tends to transfer the sentence forms, modification devices, the number, gender and case patterns of his background language owing perchance, psychological and subconscious memorization of his MT or the markedly absence of some core features or properties of the background language into English language.

In demonstration of the display of the influence of the background language within this process in relation to word order at the level of syntax, the following illustrations from British English usage and Anaang language word order in sentences using English as a target language were found as in:

16a. **What are you saying?** 16b. Afo atang se?
1 2 3 4 3 4 1

17a. **That boy's father.** 17b. Ete agwoden ade.
1 2 3 3 2 1

As can be seen from here, the explication is that the English sentences above begin with an adverbial element 'what' and ends with a verbal element 'saying' whereas the Anaang sentence begins with a pronominal element 'Afo' and ends with an adverbial element 'se'. This further explains that an Anaang learner of English at the early stages, following the disparity in the word order of the two languages is most likely to transliterate from the mother tongue into such a structure as

17c. You saying what? (17d) Afo atang se? even in a formal situation.

Eka (2000) showed that the English word order in the sentences below show a great deal of variations when analysed at the level of syntax.

18a. **That person's house.**(SBE) 18b. Ufok agwo ade. (A.L)
1 2 3 3 2 1

18c. **The house of that person.** (ENE)
4 3 5 1 2

also contains word order disparity from the Anaang sentence. Here, while the English phrase begins with a demonstrative element 'that' and ends with a nominal one 'house', the Anaang phrase structure begins with the nominal element 'Ufok' and 'The'

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and end with a demonstrative elements 'ade' and definite article 'the' (a direct opposite of the English sentence).

Therefore, with this illustration, it can concluded that an Anaang learner of English at the early stages, going by the word order in his mother tongue would end up constructing sentences such as:

19a. House person that or House that person.

19b. Ufok agwo ade or Ufok ade agwo

These types of expressions are not peculiar to Anaang, but cut across the other Nigerian languages with a very negligible percentage that are likely to maintain the structure without the mother tongue interference on the English word order, which further explains why the variation is also seen in Nigerian English usage. This postulation by Eka (2000) on the mother tongue interference on the word order of the English sentence by an Anaang learner of English is very relevant to this study because it will help other works of this nature greatly to analyse cases of direct transliteration from other background languages into the English syntactic structure.

Again, it is possible that due to the influence of local languages, a particular order may be found to be characteristic of certain usage in Nigerian English. For instance, in the order of the compound subject when it consists of a third and first person (the speaker), there is bound to be a variation as in:

20a. My wife and I will attend the show tomorrow. (SBE)

20b. I or Me and my wife will attend the show tomorrow. (SNE)

As can be seen, sentence (16b) is unconventional in its word order, but is clearly communicating and understood. This is a feature variation resulting from the influence of local languages where this is the favourite pattern.

Variation at Sentence Level

It must be pointed out that in an ideal SBE situation; the grammars of spoken and written language sentences are not congruent. The types of concord for instance, that operate in the two mediums of communication are different. In the spoken medium, a native speaker would usually say:

21a. The *workers* were expected to return by noon, but none *are* here.

22a. *None* of the footballers *have* come back yet.

23a. *Neither* Alice *nor* Josephine *have* submitted *their* books.

But in the written medium, the same native speaker would usually present himself as follows:

21b. The *workers* were expected to return by noon, but *none is* here.

22b. *None of* the footballers *has* come back yet.

23b. *Neither* Alice *nor* Josephine *has* submitted *her* book.

In the case of Standard Nigerian English, variation comes to play because it is the syntax of the written medium that operates both in the spoken and the written mediums.

Standard Nigerian English syntax is so organized in such a way that, in spite of the difference/s in the structural pattern, there is still adequate communication effected.

24a. *Could you please bring me that book?* (SBE) 24b. *I want that book.* (SNE)

24c. *Please, bring me that book.* (SNE) in a formal situation.

25a. *This book of mine is very thrilling* (SBE)

25b. *This my book is very thrilling.* (SNE)

Collocational Variations

26. *Congratulations for* your success. instead of '*congratulations on* your success.'

27. I must say it *for your own interest*, instead of 'I must say it *in your own interest*'

28. I want to *intimate about* the case. instead of 'I want to *intimate you with* the case'

29. We will *round up* the lesson next week. instead of 'We will *round off* the lesson next week'

30. It is I, *who is* to see him,(SNE) instead of 'it is I *who am* to see him'(SBE)

meaning: I is to see him. (a variation noticeable in SNE) instead of 'I am to see him'(SBE), eventhough there is communication and intelligibility.

31. My father was *converted into* Christianity (SNE) instead of "My father was *converted to* Christianity" (SBE)

32. The quarrel *resulted into* a fight (SNE), instead of "The quarrel *resulted to* a fight" (SBE).

Variation in Diction

The variation that is experienced in the choice of words in Standard Nigerian English as different from that of SBE is mostly observable in transliteration or direct lifting from the background languages. These expressions contain such lexical items which are in line with the mother tongue of a typical Nigerian language speaker, (cf.Enang, 2009).

33. This is a **small strong village** with **very strong people** because a **real raw child** died as a result of the fire outbreak.

34. **Let him come and touch** anyone of us and see what **we are going to do him**.

35. I can **stop you from moving with** that man because *he drinks a lot of cigarette*.

36. You are **carrying this matter on top of your head**. That is why I told you last but **you tried to push words inside my mouth**.

37. **The mouth of the fire** was burning upstairs, and the **delayance** was too much, so I had to **jump inside and carried** the already death baby out.

Item 33, for instance has such expressions as "*small strong village*", "*very strong people*", "*real raw child*", which are direct transliteration from the indigenous

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language in Nigeria. Item 34, has such utterance as “...*come and touch*”, “*what we are going to do him*”, and have some figurative application that matches with the mother tongue language and so deviates the native speaker’s norm. Item 35, on the other hand has “... *moving with*” to mean “*associating with*” or “*keep one’s company*” in SBE situation but are mostly freely used to effect communication in Standard Nigerian English syntactic structure. Also, such expression as “*drink...cigarette*” in stead of “*smoke*” which is an SBE usage. In item 36, expressions like “*carrying this matter on top of your head*” and “*to push words inside my mouth*” are not in conformity with the structures of the SBE eventhough communication may be said to take place. Again, item 37 has such utterances as “*the mouth of fire*” instead of “*the flame of fire*”, “*jump inside and carried*” instead of “*jumped in and picked up*” whereas the preposition “*inside*” does not collocate with “*jump*”. All these expressions are not in line the SBE usage.

Other Structural Factors

It is also possible to discover the effect of background language interference in some structural relationships. An instance is the use of the reflexive. The English language uses three forms to indicate three types of reflexive actions as follows: ourselves, each other and one another. For instance,

38. We love *ourselves*. (Everybody loves himself)

39. We love *each other*. (One person loves the other and vice versa)

40. We love *one another*. (Mutual love among more than two people).

Due to the pattern in the background or local languages in Nigeria, it is only the item 38 form that is often used in place of all the three forms. This usage is peculiar to a Nigerian English user.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has tried to offer reasons for the consideration of English as a global language. It has also dwelt on issues relating to variations at the morphological and lexical levels, words, word order, sentence, collocation, diction and other structural factors and accounted for how they contribute to syntactic variations especially in Standard Nigerian English as different from the native speakers’ norms of English as global language. The researchers have painstakingly investigated and found out that in spite of the variations at the levels mentioned above, communication has always taken place whereas intelligibility on whatever is said or passed cross normally move with dispatch as well as remain intact.

The conclusions, which borrow heavily from the reviewed literature, are that: English is a global language in spite of all pretences to the contrary. Syntactic variations in Standard Nigerian English do not significantly hinder intelligibility in

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communication in English language whatever cadres of speakers. Variations are cultural signals which must be identified and appreciated by teachers and students, native and nonnative speakers of English.

Finally, the researcher has not described variant forms as “bad”, “incorrect”, “deviant” or “uninformed”, but has accepted them as productive in the development of a globally recognized language for communication and intelligibility in the face a proliferation of world Englishes one of which is the Standard Nigerian English.

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