

A Generative Phonological Approach to the Analysis of Selected Undergraduates' Utterances

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Abstract

Language variation is facilitated by language contacts. Nigerian Scholars have over the years embarked on the description of the taxonomy of Nigerian English at the level of phonology and three major varieties have been identified by scholars over the years — the yet to be codified acrolect, the Standard Nigerian English (SNE); the mesolect, which is the intermediate variety, Popular Nigerian English (PNE) the basilect, and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), which is the substrate variety. The aim of this study is to identify the phonological features of Nigerian English in selected undergraduates' utterances. Particularly, the study sets out to investigate whether the university undergraduates are representatives of the acrolect or mesolect based on their level of educational attainment. The utterances of ten (10) 400 level undergraduates of Kwara State University were analysed using a juxtapositional approach. Fifty randomly selected words from the utterances were analysed using the Distinctive Feature Approach. The study revealed that most of the deviant phonemes are syllabic in nature because they are mostly vowels. Also, there are instances of substitution of the SNE diphthongs with the Speakers' Variety SV monophthongs as a result of the disparities in the phonemic components of the SNE and the speakers' first language. The study concluded that the attainment of the SNE in the Nigerian context is feasible if the codification of the SNE can be attained to aid the syllabus design for English language pedagogy in a non-native context as Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian English, PNE, SNE, Distinctive Features, Phonemic

Variation 1. Introduction

Language use in non-native contexts, most especially in the area of speech production — phonology, has attracted the attention of numerous scholars. Scholars such as Babatunde and Udofot (2011), Josiah and Babatunde (2011), Gut & Fuchs (2013), Josiah (2013), Lawal (2013),

Olaniyi (2013; 2014), we (2014), Alabi and Gobir (2020; 2021), Gobir, (2021), Gobir and Adwoa (2022), and several others, have examined the nature and scope of the Nigerian English.

These scholars have variously typified Nigerian English using different parameters, ranging from education to native-like exposure. From these myriads of research, it has been found that Nigerian English at the acrolectal level (Standard Nigerian English—SNE) is equivalent to the Standard British English (Josiah & Babatunde, 2011; Jowitt, 2016; Ugorji, 2010; etc.) based on the metrics of education and exposure. More recently, it has been found that education to some extent is not sufficient to determine the standard accent; attitude has a major role to play too. It is based on this backdrop that this study is aimed at examining selected utterances of university undergraduates from a comparative phonological perspective. However, due to the non-existence of the codification of the SNE, the International Corpus of English ICE-Nigeria Corpus of 2015 is adopted as the SNE model for the study.

More specifically, the selected undergraduate utterances are evaluated in this study using the Generative Phonological Approach of Chomsky and Halle (1968). This approach is used to examine the distinctions in the target language, Standard Nigerian English and the undergraduates' utterances. It is also used for the examination of the distinctive segmental features in the students' utterances and standard variety; as well as the examination of the peculiar distinctive features that characterise the undergraduates' utterances. Also, the study sets out to investigate whether the undergraduates under investigation are representatives of the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) or the Popular Nigerian English (Jowitt, 1991; 2001 & 2016).

The subsequent sections contain review of related literatures to the study. Concepts which are relevant to the study constituting the Standard Nigerian English (SNE), Popular Nigerian English (PNE) and contrastive analysis, are components of the literature review section. Subsequent discussions centre on the theoretical basis for the study, the research methodology, the analysis of the data samples collected, the discussion of findings and conclusion of the study.

2. Literature Review

Diverse researches by different scholars have been carried out on an analysis of pronunciation errors. Ononiwu and Njemanze (2015) investigated poor English pronunciation among Nigerian ESL students: The ICT Solution. In this study, these scholars examined the causes of poor

English pronunciation among ESL Nigerian students. Also, Josiah, Bodunde and Robert (2012) embarked on an analysis of the patterns of English pronunciation among Nigerian university undergraduates: challenges and prospects. While these scholars focus on the investigation on the pronunciation challenges of students, this study sets out to evaluate the level of proficiency of the Nigerian students. To achieve this, the researcher adapted the theoretical tenets of Generative Phonology for the analysis of selected undergraduates' renditions.

2.1 Standard Nigerian English (SNE)

Standard Nigerian English is the variety of English used in Nigeria to communicate across Nigeria socio-cultural boundary. A Nigerian speaker of Standard Nigerian English may not sound like an English native speaker. However, he speaks an internationally intelligible and acceptable variety of English that does not obscure understanding. This is possible in spite of vocabulary imports which reflect the speakers socio-cultural norms. This variety of English has met the set down criteria of what makes a language standard such as selection, elaboration of function, codification, acceptability and intelligibility. Most importantly, this variety of English has been classified by scholars at all levels of linguistic appraisal—Phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and lexico-semantics (Josiah; 2003; Olaniyi, 2011, 2013, etc.).

2.2 Popular Nigerian English (PNE)

The concept of Popular Nigerian English was first coined by Jowitt (1991) in his typology of Nigerian English based on the yardsticks of acceptability and its utilisation in formal and informal linguistic contexts such as classroom pedagogy, entertainment, religion, media and cross-cultural communication. According to him, this variety of English is classified as popular based on the fact that it has a wide range of speakers (pp. 47-48).

Even though the term “popular” in relation to the description of a Nigerian spoken variety of English was the effort of Jowitt (1991), his predecessors such as Banjo (1996) have identified this variety of English in their categorisations. Jowitt's Popular Nigerian English is equivalent to Banjo's variety II (two), which he describes as a variety close to the Standard British English but with strongly marked phonological and lexical peculiarities, and which has about 75% of speakers across the nation.

More recently, Nigerian English Scholars, Adegbite, Ekundayo and numerous others in the 2021 conference of the English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (ESAN) advocated for the recognition of the Popular Nigerian English as a the standard variety. In the views of these myriads of scholars, acceptability is one of the core parameters for standardisation, likewise codification, and the Popular Nigerian English has met these two conditions, hence its recommendation for the standard statusquo within the nation.

2.3 Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive study first started in the 1940s by Charles Fries. In 1957, Lado developed the contrastive hypothesis stating that the first language would help identify the feature that would represent difficulty or ease in learning a second language. This also helps to identify the differences and similarities between the first and the second language. Lado asserts that second language learners transfer the forms and meaning the way they are distributed in their native language to the second language. Lado stated that systematic comparison of languages can help predict and describe the difficult features that can face a second language learner in L2 learning. This perspective relied on structuralism as stated by Bloomfield (1993) which further assumed that the structure of any language is finite and hence can be determined and compared to another language (Byung-gon, 1972).

The second perspective to guide the contrastive analysis hypothesis was the theory of Behaviourism due to its assumption that the difficulty or easiness of acquiring a second language is based on the already acquired habits of the first language. This, therefore, led to the emergence of transfer theory that mainly relied on the assumption of transfer of habits from the native language to the target one (Corder, 1967 cited in Byung-gon, 1972). The transfer theory complements the contrastive analysis hypothesis and serves its applied purpose. It illustrates how certain linguistic features of the second language can be more difficult to acquire than others. Mair (2020) claim that when the features of the contrasted languages are similar, positive transfer occurs; while in cases of different features, negative transfer shows, causing difficulty of acquisition. And in cases of no relation between features, zero transfer takes place.

3. Theoretical Framework

Chomsky and Halle (1968) are the proponents of Generative Phonology. Generative Phonology is an aspect of generative grammar that assigns the correct phonetic representations to utterances in such a way as to reflect a native speaker's internal grammar. The components of Generative Phonology include levels of phonological representation. Generative Phonology states two levels of phonological representation which incorporate the most basic form of a word before any phonological rules have been applied to it. This shows what a native speaker knows about the abstract underlying phonology of his language. Second is phonetic representation which is a form of a word that is spoken and heard.

Other tools of Generative Phonology include: phonological rules which delete, insert or change segments, or change the features of segmentism. Apart from this, the distinctive features make it possible to capture the generalities of phonological rules. To Durand (1999), binarism is the major function of distinctive feature in Generative Phonology. Roach (2000) among others, classified distinctive features into the major class features, creative features and secondary features. The last is linearity, a stream of speech which is seen as a sequence of discrete sound segments, where each segment constitutes simultaneously occurring features (McMahon, 2001).

Phonological processes are also aspects of generative grammar that concern with the patterns of sound errors that typically help to simplify speech when trying to speak. Phonological processes include: substitution which has to do with replacing one class of sounds with another class of sounds; syllable structure which accounts for syllabic reduction, omission or replacement; assimilation which has to do with when sounds/ syllables start to sound like surrounding sounds. In this study, the data samples are analysed using the identified tools of Generative Phonology.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive design and the qualitative research approach. The population for this study constitutes the totality of the 400 level students of Kwara State University, whose programme of study is English language, meaning that the participants are pursuing a B.A. degree in English. The studied participants are also speakers of English as a second language. The mother tongues of most of the studied participants are Yoruba and Nupe languages. The

instrument for this study consists of recorded utterances of selected Kwara State University students which are collected through the participatory observation method. This method is adopted in order to generate objective data as the awareness of the population for the study may hinder the collection of valid data for analysis. The data collected are analysed perceptually through the application of the theoretical tenets of Chomsky and Halle's (19), Generative Phonology, the Distinctive Features Approach. Other component of the comparative analysis is the evaluation of the allophonic variations.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Distinctive Segmental Features

In this section, the segmental features discernible from the utterances of the studied participants Speaker's Variants (SV) are juxtaposed against the Standard Nigerian English to identify the areas of disparity in the two linguistic forms. From the samples collected for this study, it has been discovered that there are specific phonemes that are dropped and substituted or not substituted by the respondents. Examples are cited as follows:

Table 1: Datum One

Utterance	Words	SNE	SV
But I don't used to go to our food canteen but that day, I just went.	Don't	/dəʊnt/	[dɔnt]
	Use	/ju:z/	[yu:s]
	Canteen	/kænti:n/	[ka:ntɪn]

In example 1, the diphthong /əu/ is substituted for [ɔn] thereby bringing in the nasalised vowel in the inventory of the speaker. Apart from this, the consonant /j/ is also substituted with [y] in phoneme inventory traceable to the South Western part of Nigeria. This is also an illustration of the mother-tongue interference. In sample 2, the monophthong /æ/ and /ɪ:/ has been substituted with [a:] and [ɪ] in the SV.

Table 2: Datum Two

Utterance	Words	SNE	SV
Some of us actually feel pressured to the	Pressured	/preʃəd/	[preʃɔ:d]

extent that all we think about is how to pass this course. Our reason is attached to our portal	Extent	/ɪkstent/	[ɛkstent]
	Think	/θɪnk/	[tɪnk]
	Course	/kɔ:s/	[kɔs]

In example 1, the schwa sound /ə/ is replaced with [ɔ:] since there is no schwa sound /ə/ in any of the Nigerian languages and also in sample 2, the /ɪ/ sound is replaced with /e/. This variety is traceable to pronunciations, the inability of the non-native speaker of English to differentiate between alphabet pronunciation and word pronunciation. The respondent has pronounced the word orthographically based on the spelling. In sample 3, the /θ/ sound is not present in the Nigerian phonemic inventory so it has been substituted with [t]. In sample F, the schwa sound /ə/ has been replaced with [a] which is occasional variant of the /ə/ in the SV.

Table 3: Datum Three

utterance	Words	SNE	SV
The mallam tortured the students in Gombe. They beat them to the extent that they did not even care whether they are someone's children.	Tortured	/tɔ:ʃɛd/	[tɔ:ʃɔ:d]
	Students	/stju:dənts/	[studənts]
	Extent	/ɪkstent/	[ɛkstent]
	Care	/kɛə/	[kɪe]
	Whether	/weðə/	[weda:]
	Children	/ʃɪldrən/	[ʃɪldrən]

In the first illustration, the schwa sound /ə/ is substituted with /ɔ:/. In sample B, the palatal sound /j/ is omitted and also there is substitution of /u:/ with [u]. Lastly, the consonant cluster in the SNE realisation is reduced with vowel insertions. In sample 3, the monophthong /ɪ/ is substituted with [e] in SV. In sample 4, /ɛə/ sound is substituted with [ɪə]. There is a substitution of diphthong phoneme. This time around it is the combination of vowel phonemes. Instead of /ɛə/ or its correspondent /ɪə/, the respondent chose /ɪe/, an indigenised version of the correct phoneme. In sample 5, the /ð/ is substituted with /d/ and /ə/ is substituted with the variant [a:].

Table 4: Datum Four

Utterance	Words	SNE	SV
The situation is different . In Northern Nigeria where they made Quranic education compulsory , the system of education there is brutal .	Situation	/sɪʃʊeɪʃən/	[sɪtweɪʃən]
	Different	/dɪfərənt/	[dɪfrent]
	Northern	/nɔːəən/	[nɔːtan]
	Nigeria	/naɪdʒɪəriə/	[naɪjɪriə]
	Compulsory	/kəmˈpʊlsəri/	[kəmˈpɔsri]
	Brutal	/bruːtəl/	[bruːtaː]

In example 1, the palate-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ is substituted with an alveolar plosive [t], the last syllable in the SNE which can be syllabified as /sɪʃʊeɪʃn/ has been nasalised in the SV. This is an evidence of mother tongue transfer. Among the vowel categories in the Yoruba language, which is the first language (L1) of the speaker are nasalised vowel, hence, the transfer of the L1 attribute to the L2. Also, due to the substitution of the peak in the second syllable, the vowel /ʊ/, with the labio-dental fricative [w], the word, which is supposed to be rendered in four syllables— /sɪ-tʃʊ-eɪ-ʃən/, has been rendered as tri-syllabic [sɪt-weɪ-ʃən]. Apart from the substitution of the vowel phoneme, another factor which is responsible for the syllabic length reduction is the unavailability of the diphthong /eɪ/, in the first language of the speaker. Also in sample 2, the lateral /l/ sound has been omitted while in sample 3, the schwa sound /ə/ in SNE has been omitted in the SV. In sample 3, the dental fricative /θ/ has been substituted with the consonantal sound [t] in the SV. In sample 4, the post-alveolar affricate sound /dʒ/ is substituted with the consonant sound [j] in the SV. In samples 5 and 6, the schwa sound /ə/ is substituted with [ɔ], [ɪ] and [aː] in the SNE respectively.

Table 5: Datum Five

utterance	Words	SNE	SV
There is no cooperation between the literature and language students.	Cooperation	/kəʊpərəɪʃn/	[kɔːpreɪʃn]
	Between	/biːtwiːn/	[bitwɪn]
	Literature	/lɪtrəʃən/	[lɪtreɪʃəː]
	Language	/læŋgwɪdʒ/	[lɛŋgewɪdʒ]

In the illustrations, it has been observed that the diphthong /əu/ is dropped and substituted with monophthong [ɔ:] in the SV. The monophthong /ə/ that is present in SNE has been omitted in the SV. Also, a remarkable deduction is that the polysyllabic word has been realised as a tri-syllabic word. In sample 2, the long monophthong /ɪ:/ has been substituted with the short monophthong [ɪ] in the SV. In sample 3, since we do not have schwa sound in the SV, it has been replaced with the phoneme [eɪ], [e] and [ɔ:]. Also in sample 4, the sound /æ/ has been replaced with [a] in the SV.

5.2 Binary Classification

The previous analysis based on the juxtaposition of the SNE and SV has revealed that the specific areas of disparities in the superstrate— SNE and the substrate— SV include syllabic reduction, syllabic substitution, vowel elongation,. In this section, the distinctive features of the SV variables are analysed based on the combination of major class features, manner features, place of articulation features and the binary taxonomy.

Table 6: Deviant phonemes and their distinctive properties

Speakers' Realisations	deviant phonemes	distinctive features						
		Syllabic	Labial	Nasal	Dental	Lateral	Continuant	Consonantal
don't	on [o]	+	-	+	-	-	-	-
yu:s	y	+	-	-	-	-	-	+
		-	-	-	-	-	+	+
ka:ntɪn	a: ɪ	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
		+	-	-	-	-	-	-
preʃɔ:d	ɔ:	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
ekstent	e	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
tɪnk	t	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
kɔ:s	s	-	-	-	-	-	+	+
rɪzɪn	ɪ	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
ata:tsd	a a:	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
		+	-	-	-	-	+	-

tɔ:ʃɔ:d	ɔ:	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
studænt	ʊ	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
	æ	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
ekstent	e		+	-	-	-	-	-
kiə	iə			+	-	-	-	-
weda:	da:			+	-	-	-	+
ʃildren	e			+	-	-	-	-
sitweɪʃən	w	+	+	-	-	-	+	+
	ən	+	-	+	-	-	-	-
	[ə]							
dɪfrent	e	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
nɔ:tən	t	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
	ən	+	-	+	-	-	-	-
	[ə]							
naijɪriə	j	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
kɒmpɔsɪ	ɔ	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
	ɪ	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
bru:təl	a:	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
kɔ:preɪʃn	ɔ:	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
bɪtwɪn	ɪ	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
lɪtreɪʃɔ:	eɪ	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
	ɔ:	+	-	-	-	-	+	-
læŋgweɪdʒ	ən eɪ	+	-	+	-	-	-	-
		+	-	-	-	-	+	-

The table above presents the deviant phonemes and their distinctive properties. In the table, the study revealed that most of the deviant phonemes are vowels. This indicates that the SNE and SV phonemes do not have much difference. The major areas of disparities are the vowels. This

reflects that Nigerian speakers, which the undergraduates students under investigation represents have more problems with the realisation of the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) vowel phonemes due to the unavailability of most of these phonemes in the inventories of the Nigerian indigenous languages. Based on this, almost all of the deviant phonemes are (+) syllabic because most of them constitute the peak of the syllables. There are few labials, nasals, dentals, lateral and consonants, most of the phonemes have negative (-) classification because all these characteristics are peculiar to the consonant sounds. The continuant takes the second position because most vowels are continuants. Both syllabic and continuant classifications are fairly represented. This further emphasises the realisation of vowels as the challenge of Nigerian speakers of English in this category.

6. Discussion of Findings

The data has been examined using the tenets of Chomsky et al. (1968) Generative Phonology. Some deductions have been made: the distinctive segmental features of the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) and the Speakers' Variant (SV) forms in the undergraduates' utterances include substitution of the SNE diphthongs with the SV monophthong, likewise the substitution of triphthong with a disyllabic in SV which is determined basically by the phoneme inventories of the indigenous languages. We also have the substitution of schwa sound /ə/ with other phonemes since there is no schwa sound /ə/ in any of the Nigerian languages. The substitution of weak syllable with a strong one is also traceable to SV.

Also, the possible distinctive features in the binary classification of the deviant forms in the undergraduate students' renditions include the use of vowels which serves as the deviant phonemes by the SV speakers. The undergraduate students' under investigation have more problems with the realisation of the Standard Nigerian English (SNE) vowel phonemes due to the unavailability of most of these phonemes in the inventories of the Nigerian indigenous languages. Almost all the deviant phonemes are syllabic because most of them constitute the peak of the syllables. The continuant takes the second position because most vowels are continuants.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implication

Attempt has been made in this study to investigate the speech patterns of Selected Kwara State University Students through the deployment of the tenets of the theories of Chomsky et al.'s

Generative Phonology. The study has revealed that the adaptation of the tenet of the phonological theory, Generative Phonology to the analysis of the studied undergraduates' utterances has helped to identify the distinctive features that characterise the Popular Nigerian English as a variety of English. From the study, it has been observed that factors such as interlanguage phonology of the undergraduates are responsible for the variation in their speech patterns. However, there is a low level of compliance towards the Standard Nigerian English, which is the nation's acrolect. In conclusion, more could be achieved by the undergraduates as representatives of the educated Nigerians if close attention could be paid on the areas of differences in the Standard Nigerian English and Popular Nigerian English, and attitudinal issues such as negligence are worked on.

Language is an entity of utmost importance to every nation and in the case of Nigeria, linguistic harmonisation is germane. Due to the Nigerian multi-ethnic nature, arriving at a language of national identity has continue to pose problem and English language, which is serving the official status quo is controversial due to the problem of categorisation and standardisation issues. This study is a way forward towards solving this important national problem which has linguistic orientation. The implication of this study to policy implementation is that the popular English has been identified as the most accepted variety of spoken English among Nigerians. It is therefore recommended that the Nigerian government, language experts and other stakeholders curriculum designers, teachers and parents, should work together towards the codification of this variety of English and adopt it as the nation's standard form of English, not only at the phonological level but also other levels of linguistic appreciation.

Abbreviations

SNE: Standard Nigerian English

SV: Speaker's/ Speakers' Variants

L1- First Language

L2/ SL- Second Language

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