

L2 Speakers' Strategy: A Study of Discourse Markers Peculiar to Nigerian English

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Abstract

*Despite Nigeria's multilinguistic and multicultural diversity, it remains a national entity. This nationhood is maintained through certain variables, one of which is the use of a common language - the English language - which has arguably assumed a national outlook known as Nigerian English. This paper is essentially concerned with the analysis of discourse markers which are peculiar to Nigerian English. This paper also views Nigerian English as one of the learners' strategies of owning the English language despite its position as a second language in Nigeria. It aims to represent discourse markers as central features of Nigerian English and indicators of ownership and identity in general discourses and texts. It also examines the importance of discourse markers in indigenous texts and how they provide insight into the existence of discourse markers in conversations. Several studies done on Nigerian English seem to focus on the different and unique features of lexical items, syntax, semantics, phonology, etc, but attention has not been given to the recognition of discourse markers as a peculiarity of Nigerian English which are mutually intelligible to Nigerian users. The paper adopts Labov's Variability Theory which explains language variation in relation to social variables and their correlation with social structure. It is also concerned with speech evaluation and how it influences speech forms. Information about discourse markers were obtained from primary sources comprising the texts *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe and *Yellow-Yellow* by Kaine Agary. Excerpts were selected from the texts using the purposive sampling technique. Information about discourse markers were also obtained from secondary sources of written materials and journal articles, which were used for the analysis and discussion. The study concludes that indigenous discourse markers as found in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* play important roles in depicting ownership in discourse and texts, and are intelligible to Nigerian users.*

Keywords: Second language, discourse, markers, variability, indigenous, intelligible.

Introduction

Comprehension is often the goal of communication and in language study, mutual intelligibility is central to effective communication and coexistence. In the Nigerian situation, English language (often acquired as second language) has undoubtedly

served as a wider means of communication due to the multilingual nature of the country. As a medium of communication, English language serves as the means of contact between Nigeria and the outside world. In a situation (like the Nigerian situation) where English language is in contact with many local languages and is a second language, it is expected that the variety of English found will be different from the varieties of English spoken in countries where English is the mother tongue or first language. The ultimate point here is that speakers of a language tend to use the existing machinery available in the languages available to them in order to accomplish discourse related work. Such machinery could be the adoption or introduction of discourse markers which might lend itself to the speaker at the discourse level. There is also evidence that existing machinery from other languages resulting from language contact can influence both the identity and location of discourse markers.

The point about the English language in Nigeria is not just that it is different from British or American English, but there are several varieties of English ranging from something very near Standard English to the Pidgin English used at the market place. Since there are different varieties based on the different local languages, it is difficult to know or draw a line on what to accept as Standard Nigerian English. According to Jowitt (1991), it is time to get away from the over-flogged issues of “standard” vs “non-standard”, “international” vs “internal”, and get down to the task of describing and analyzing the forms of Nigerian English. However, the target of this article is not on what is standard Nigerian English but on the fact that there exists a variety of English used in Nigeria by Nigerians, and that this variety is often mutually intelligible to the users within the context of Nigeria. Consequently, discourse markers used in the Nigerian context would differ from those of other English varieties like the British English.

Nigerian English (in this study) may be defined as the speech form that embraces all the speakers of English in Nigeria. Creativity is well manifested in Nigerian English and Bamgbose explains that “expressions are coined to reflect the Nigerian experience or world view, expressions such as “to take in” (to become pregnant), “been-to” (one who has travelled abroad particularly to England)...” Based on this background, every grammatical system of Nigerian English offers opportunities for unique solutions and stylistic variation output that might be unintelligible to a native speaker of English language. It is in this context that the question of peculiarity of discourse markers as used in Nigerian English arises - how mutually intelligible and how acceptable discourse markers are as used in Nigerian English. Studies on discourse markers often focus around usage in Standard English, hence the need to include studies on Nigerian indigenous discourse markers as used in texts and discourse. This research aims to analyze discourse markers peculiar to Nigerian English speakers in an attempt to establish that they are learner strategies and intelligible as seen in Chika Unigwe’s *Night Dancer* and Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*.

Studies have been carried out on discourse markers and how the native speakers have used discourse markers as strategies in their conversation or utterances for effective coherence. However, little or no work has been done on the use of Indigenous discourse markers in Nigerian English. It is against this backdrop that this study is designed to look at some of these lexical items with a view to identifying those indigenous discourse markers peculiar to only Nigerian English as used in some literary works, and to explain their various literal and contextual meanings. In doing this, Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* were selected. This study is significant as it looks at discourse markers in Nigerian English, as employed in the literary texts selected for this study. The study is of utmost significance because it would avail scholars the opportunity to learn and make new discoveries in the use of indigenous discourse markers in Nigerian English. It would also offer a comprehensible and coherent update in the field of knowledge on the usage of discourse markers.

Methodology

This research is essentially concerned with the analysis of discourse markers in Nigerian English as found in written texts. Thus the primary data consists of the texts *Night Dancer* and *Yellow-Yellow*. Excerpts were selected from the texts, using the purposive sampling technique. The secondary data which is a product of exclusive library based research consists of critical works, journals and scholarly publications in related areas. This study is designed to look at some of these lexical items with a view to (1) identifying those indigenous discourse markers peculiar to only Nigerian English as used in some literary works, and (2) explaining their various literal and contextual meanings.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws insight from Labov's Variationist theory. The major underlying principle of the variationist theory is the Variability Theory, which was developed by Labov and introduced into sociolinguistic theory in order to account for differences in the use of language in its social context. This was necessitated by the discovery that the hitherto recognized regional variation or the study of dialectology could not adequately account for language variation. Labov (1972) therefore works with the variability theory in New York to determine speech among blacks. Labov's study in which he identifies five different classes in New York City alone is also very relevant. Certain sociolinguistic variables of age, sex, religion, occupation etc. are very important in the analysis of speech in human speech communities. Variability Theory explains language variation in relation to social variables and their correlation with social structure, by providing explanation on how languages differ and the division of language according to function. It is concerned with speech evaluation and how it influences speech forms. The phonological, syntactic and semantic interference of language systems in a speech community and the modification of these language systems along with the processes of language acquisition, and conservation are also a major preoccupation of the variability

theory. The linguistic aspect of this study focuses mainly on the lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns or variation are paramount to the existing structure of Nigerian English.

Literature Review

Discourse is language structure beyond analysis of sentences. It can also be referred to as pieces of language larger than a sentence that function together to convey a given idea or information. The linguistic devices that are used to bind these pieces of language or expression together are called Discourse Markers. They are used in conversation or writing to show or signal the relationship between ideas or information in a given context. Fraser (9) looks at discourse markers as 'prepositional phrase' with certain exceptions that signal a relationship between the segments they introduce. He further explains that discourse markers have a core meaning which usually is not conventional, and their more specific interpretation is negotiated by the context, both linguistic and conceptual. Discourse markers are often referred to as linking words and phrases or sentence connectors. They may be described as the fillers that bind together the piece of writing and making the different parts of the text come together. They are used less frequently in speech unless the speech is very formal (Blakemore, 2002). They are words or phrases used by speakers or writers to link ideas or information in a discourse.

According to Gerard (10), discourse are words like 'however', 'although' and 'nevertheless', which are referred to more commonly as 'linking words' and 'linking phrases', or 'sentence connectors'. They may be described as the 'glue' that binds together a piece of writing, making the different parts of the text 'stick' together. Without sufficient discourse markers in a piece of writing, a text would not seem logically constructed and the connections between the different sentences and paragraphs would not be obvious. Discourse markers however guide the reader to predict the direction of the flow of discourse than linking the various text elements especially in spoken discourse. Blakemore explains that discourse markers "guide the hearer in finding the most relevant interpretation in the given context by constraining the number of possible interpretations". She further observes that there are no consensus among linguists as to what discourse markers are and how many they are in English. Some scholars have used such terms as pragmatic marker, discourse connective or discourse particles to describe a discourse marker and again it is difficult to conclude that they all refer to the same thing. She provides some examples of discourse markers in English which include 'well', 'but', 'so', 'indeed', 'in other words', 'as a result', and 'now' (202). On the other hand, Stenstrom presents discourse markers as conversations that are much less likely and less personal (17). Given these definitions, it is clear that discourse markers function as markers of relationships between units of discourse and they are essential tools that enhance coherent discourse.

Brinton says discourse markers are phonologically short items that have no little referential meaning but serve pragmatic or procedural purpose (1). He further notes

that they fall into two categories (having a two-fold function): those which belong to the textual mode of language and those that belong to the interpersonal mode of language. Brinton states that in the textual mode, the speaker structures meaning as text, creating cohesive passages of discourse. The interpersonal mode is the expression of the speaker's attitudes, evaluation, judgments, expectations and demands as well as the nature of the social exchange, the role of the speaker and the role assigned to the hearer (38).

Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that discourse markers are important features of both formal and informal native speaker language. The skilful use of discourse markers often indicates a higher level of fluency and an ability to produce and understand authentic language. Similarly, Dulgar (2008) maintains that discourse markers are linguistic devices available for a writer to structure a discourse. Discourse markers generally consist of grammatical/function words. Unlike content words, they do not convey meaning on their own neither do they change the meaning of a sentence. They only perform grammatical functions by linking ideas in a piece of writing. Most discourse markers signal the listener/reader of continuity in text or the relationship between the preceding and following text. Without sufficient discourse markers in a piece of writing, a text would seem illogically constructed and the connections between the different sentences would be missing.

From available studies on discourse markers in the Nigerian sociolinguistic context, Sharndama and Yakubu (2014) studied the pedagogical implications of discourse markers in academic report writing. Their study analyzed the use of discourse markers in enhancing effective academic writing such as laboratory reports, field trip reports, Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) or final year project reports. They analysed different views of scholars to re-emphasize the need for teaching and appropriately utilizing discourse markers for effective academic report writing. This study is an example of existing studies on discourse markers in English language. Jauro et al also studied discourse markers in Nigerian news papers and also establish that discourse markers function to enhance the cohesive links between the units of talk in texts.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Agary's novel *Yellow-Yellow* is about the people living in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is a novel that gives full insight into the suffering and agony caused by oil exploration and exploitation in local communities, the struggle and suffering of single mothers, violence, love and the ever increasing rate of teenage pregnancy in the society.

Night Dancer on the other hand is a story about the challenges and stigma of single-motherhood. The main character, Ezi, is late but leaves a couple of letters and memorabilia for her daughter, to come to terms with her identity, her mother's personality, and the reasons behind her decision to become a radical single mother

in a highly conservative, hypocritical and courteous society. It is set in three areas, Enugu, Lakponta and Kaduna, and Unigwe focuses on the nuances of the middle class.

Indigenous Discourse Markers in the *Night Dancer*

The discourse markers identified in this text are ‘Ah’, ‘oo’, ‘eh’, ‘ke’, and ‘ha’.

The first discourse marker “ah” is an exclamation akin to the conventional ‘aah’ which could express pleasure or admiration. As an indigenous discourse marker however, it is used to indicate a concern, fear or emotional pain as seen in the following excerpt:

“Ah, may this heat not kill us oo”, she said pulling off her bobbed wig to reveal sparse greying hair held untidily by a rubber at the top of her head. (11)

The marker “oo” provides an extra exclamation which serves to show the feeling of the speaker with regards to the point being made. The marker “ah” and “oo” reveal the attitudinal disposition of the speaker to the intensity of the “heat” being experienced as at the moment of discussion. Both markers point at a continuation of talk in the written discourse of the novel. More so, both discourse markers consolidate the clarity of the message in that particular text and the action of the speaker. The marker “oo” has a suggestive and emphatic effect and concluding additive to ‘ah’. These markers are also used by the same speaker (Madam Gold) in other conversations:

“It is just your mother. And we’re not oyibo oo, we are not white people, for whom love is enough.” (14)

“Ah! My friend was a tenacious woman!” (20)

Also, in the following extracts, the repeated use of local discourse markers “oo” and “ah” are both indicators of the attitude of their various users and the emphatic intonation in the expressions:

“Don’t talk like this to Mommy oo!”

“Of course not oo. I dey craze?” (56)

“Ah. Thank God for His journey mercies.” (120)

“Ah, she thought to herself, her education into the city’s ways had already begun; her bag of tales was already starting to be filled.” (143)

“Ah, sorry oo, your co-wife!” (204)

“Ah, not today oo.” Rapu intervened. (229)

Another indigenous discourse marker used is “eh”, which is contextually interrogative. “Eh” contextually comes after the interrogation but before the question mark to add emphasis to an already asked question. It belongs in the English language additive discourse markers’ group and seen in the following extracts:

“Who can afford to buy anything in bulk these days, eh?” (13)

“What do you know about sacrifice, eh Mma?...” (20)

“Did she tell you about Goody Goody and his wife? Eh? Did she?” (21)

“Have you ever seen anyone keep a chicken as a pet, eh?” (22)

“What’s all this nonsense about, eh, Adamma?” (22)

“That way, she could stay at home with you and earn at the same time. Why do you think she wanted that, eh?” (24)

“So you think you’re a big woman now, eh?” (192)

“A few dissenting voices, eh?...” (228)

The indigenous discourse marker as used in the above extracts does not convey different ideas to the understanding of readers. This means that the marker performs only one function of providing emphatic meaning to the information conveyed in the questions asked in various the conversations where it has been used in the text. ‘Ke’ is an indigenous discourse marker that signals a peculiar kind of interrogation. It is an emphatic marker that places stress on a singular word. The use of ‘ke’ might be an expression of surprise, disgust, or amazement, so the meaning changes based on the context it is used. The question asked using discourse marker “ke” does not necessarily require an instant or a direct response from the addressed. It is a form of isolated interrogation such as “choices ke?” and “bank ke?” It is a very strong interrogative discourse marker that performs an additive function in an interlocution. “Ke” also indicates the attitude, that is, sarcasm of a speaker and the seriousness attached to the subject of the discourse as reflected in the extract below:

Madam Gold hissed long and rolled her eyes. “Choices ke? Bank ke?” (23)

“Ha” is another an indigenous discourse marker that adds emphasis to a sentence which it precedes or follows; it is independent of the sentence. ‘Ha’ is an interjection and does not necessarily influence the meaning of the structure except in magnifying it, by indicating the speaker’s attitude and gravity of the message being passed across as used in the following extracts:

“Blood is thicker than water, you hear. Ha! Let me tell you...” (48).

“Ha! Your mother is more of a mother to me than she ever was.” (56)

“Someone said she spied them once, touching each other like man and woman. Ha!” (60)

Indigenous Discourse Markers in *Yellow-Yellow*

The discourse markers identified in this text are ‘O’, ‘ah’, and ‘haba’

The indigenous discourse marker ‘o’ and ‘Ah’ serve as fillers that perform the textual function of interjections. Agary uses ‘o’ extensively to indicate the degree of emotion attached to the expressions of the characters in their various conversations. In each of the conversation where the marker was used, the user tends to place an emphasis by an undertone; a rejection, a warning, a surprise, an appeal, an offer and a respect in several degrees of emotional outburst which directly reveals the attitude of the speaker and the importance attached to the conversation:

“Bibi, nawa for u o. We all poor but we dey join hand help each other.” (8)

As Mama Ebiye led my mother away, I heard her say, “Yellow-Yellow no be small pickin again o. You go allow the girl grow o.” (16)

“Don’t go and get carried away and spoil yourself o. My back is not ready for grandchildren.” (23)

“Tell us, see how fresh you look, you don’t want us to enjoy with you... It is not easy o!” (37)

“Yellow, when you reach Port Harcourt, do not disgrace us there o!” she said. (44)

“Port no be like village o,” she said with laughter...but you no fit survive city life if you slow o.” (53)

“All I could manage in response was, ‘Nawa o!’” (60)

“Ah, Admiral, I didn’t say that o.” I pleaded (134)

“Ah, no o, sister, no be like dat at all. E be like say e sabi you, dat’s all.” (168)

“Ah, she is Sisi’s little friend o.” (56)

“Ah, you are the one from our big auntie,” and then it seemed he could spare an extra five minutes on top of what previously had offered. (71)

Also the discourse marker, ‘haba’ has its origin in the northern part of Nigeria but it is used in other regions of the country. It is predominantly used among Hausa speakers. ‘Haba’ has different contextual meanings which depend on the situation. Although, like other native discourse markers identified in this study, ‘haba’ does not affect the meaning of the sentence or structure that precedes or follows it. It only performs the function of interjection which is also indicative of the speaker’s attitude in response to what had gone before. Agary uses ‘haba’ in the conversation that involved Laye, Zainab and Aliyu, the last two being Hausas from Northern Nigeria:

“Haba! She knows I am only joking. You know I am joking, right?” (95)

It should be noted that such peculiar indigenous discourse markers are contextually based; in other words, their meaning is open to different interpretations depending on the context in which they are used. For example, ‘haba’ here is used as a *surprise*, while in another context, it could be used as an *exclamation*, and these are used to show the mood and intention of the speaker/hearer and to pass the message in a culturally appropriate manner.

Conclusion

Agary and Unigwe’s linguistic inventiveness are products of their sociocultural backgrounds and knowledge of the larger Nigerian linguistic axiom. In this way, they used a variety of English that enables them to communicate their own cultural realities to other parts of the world as well. From the foregoing analysis, it would be agreed that these peculiar indigenous discourse markers indicate mutual intelligibility and acceptability between the authors and readers/audience alike, as displayed by both authors through their creative works.

The linguistic choices in Agary and Unigwe’s texts have aesthetics and create synergy between the language used in the texts and the environment in which it is used. These choices are inspirational and socio-culturally relevant to the linguistic

composition of the text, as the culturally rich expressions in both texts provide vivid images in the reader. Thus, the possibility of misinterpretation, particularly by the Nigerian reader, is highly reduced. In addition, the discourse markers play a crucial role in achieving a successful communicative act in text and are key elements in the text production and perception.

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