
Americanism and its Influence on the Orthography of Postgraduate Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: November 3, 2019

Accepted: November 7, 2019

Published: November 30,
2019

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

KEYWORDS

*Americanism, Competence,
Error Analysis, Standard
British English, Orthography.*

ABSTRACT

The linguistic situation of Nigeria is no doubt influenced by contact with a handful of foreign languages. This is factored on various economic, religious, technological and political influences inherent in the country. The English spoken in Nigeria imitates carefully the Standard British English with confusing fluctuations with the American variety. This paper studies the influence of Americanism on the orthography of postgraduate students of English in the University of Ibadan. The study was premised on Ellis' four stages of error analysis namely: collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors and explanation of errors. This study concludes that academic competence may not influence English language experts in the consistent use of SBE, though it has been the medium of instruction from secondary school to the postgraduate levels.

1. Introduction

The linguistic situation of Nigeria is no doubt influenced by contact with a handful of foreign languages. This is factored on various economic, religious, technological and political influences inherent in the country. English, however, has dominated the linguistic circle of the Nigerian society, sidelining both indigenous and other foreign languages. Schmeid (1991) points out that native languages were relegated to secondary position, as they were perceived as not worthy of being used in institutions during colonization.

The hegemony of the English language has been validated by both the language and educational policy in Nigeria which assigns salient roles to the language. Thus, an access to English language is an access to upward social mobility. Fakuade (2004: 19-20) posits that *Nigeria is an English-speaking nation, and the basic federal policy on education is to recognize the need to prepare Nigerian children/students to function successfully in an English speaking nation.* With the emerging variables of English and the rapid transition of the world into a global village, technology has given English out to some linguistic paradoxes, thereby rendering the language susceptible to changes and differences in use. Three observable varieties of English predominant in the Nigerian setting are British English, American English and the Nigerian English. The British English has its origin in colonization. The American one has its origin in technological advancement. The Nigerian English is dependent on both the British and the American English.

Kperogi (2010) identified four sources of Nigerian English: linguistic improvisation, old fashioned British expressions, usage errors normalized over time, and a mishmash of British and American English. The spelling errors encountered by speakers of English in Nigeria can, therefore, be traced to the mishmash of British and American English. Bearing in mind that the acceptable variety of English in Nigeria is British, Nigerian users are faced with the dilemma of choosing between two varieties at their disposal. Thus, this study puts into perspective the observable errors identified in the writings of post-graduate students of the University of Ibadan. The goal is to investigate the identifiable errors and the influences of Americanism in the orthography of postgraduate students of the University of Ibadan. Leaning on the theoretical construct of error analysis, the study identifies, describes and explains the errors in the data presented.

2. Justification for Competence

Chomsky (1965) defines linguistic competence as the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language which makes it possible for them to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical ones. He differentiates between linguistic competence and linguistic performance – the former is the speaker's unconscious knowledge of the grammar of his or her native language while the latter has to do with the actual production and comprehension of utterances (de Valenzuela 1998). Probably no notion within transformational-generative grammatical theory has aroused more controversy than the competence/performance distinction. Criticisms of the distinction ranges from the assertion that it is *almost incoherent* (Labov, 1972:110) to the conclusion that it is

coherent enough, yet *too confining* (Clark & Haviland, 1974:92), since so many systematic aspects of language do not fall under the generativists' conception of competence. Problems such as the structure of conversations, the relation of meaning to context, the perceptual difficulty of surface structures, the production of speech errors and speech hesitations, and other similar phenomena do not fit under this rather small umbrella.

Since competence is a psychological or mental function, it is obvious that the idea will not be appropriate for English conception in Nigeria where it is a second language, often learnt in school and rarely acquired naturally. It is therefore paramount to redefine competence in relation to written English in the Nigerian context. Multilinguals rarely develop equal proficiency in all the languages they know. Most Nigerians possess the competence described in generative grammar only in their mother tongues, not in English (Akinjobi 2011). This paper therefore addresses competence and proficiency in Nigerian English from an academic point of view. A degree or higher degree in English language is regarded as proof of competence, especially having been exposed to the fundamental knowledge of Standard British English spelling, grammar and usage.

3. Nigerian English: British or American?

While we do not want to get caught up in the conceptual squabbles among linguists over the meaning, scope, and content of Nigerian English (see Bamgbose, 1982; Jibril, 1986; Jowitt, 1991), we think it is useful to briefly operationalise our conception of it. By NE, we mean the variety of English that is broadly spoken and written by the literary, intellectual, political, and media elite across the regional and ethnic spectrums of Nigeria. The definition seems apparently elitist but this is true of all "standard" varieties of all "modern" languages in the world (Milroy, 2002). What is called Standard British English, for instance, is no more than the idiosyncratic usage of the language by the English royalty—and by the political, intellectual, literary, and media elite of the country (Wales 1994).

No Nigerian who was educated at home, including those who mock NE, can help writing and speaking English in ways that reflect their socio-linguistic singularities. It is a legitimate national variety that has evolved, over several decades, out of Nigeria's unique experiences as a post-colonial, polyglot nation. As Achebe (1997) affirmed, in defense of his creative semantic and lexical contortions of the English language to express uniquely Nigerian socio-cultural thoughts, that any language that has the cheek to leave its primordial shores and encroach on the territory of other people should learn to come to terms with the inevitable reality that it would be domesticated. Following Kperogi (2010), there are four basic sources of Nigerian English namely: linguistic improvisation, innocent grammatical errors, stale British English expressions and Americanisms interspersed with British English. This paper therefore investigates how some Nigerian postgraduate students of English (emphasizing language) who have acquired a degree in English language and are in pursuit of a master's degree appropriate Americanisms in their English spelling proficiency.

4. Literature Review

Several studies have explored different aspects of error analysis in the speech of Educated Nigerians. However, we shall limit ourselves to those with related bearing on this study. Kperogi (2010) studies the similarities between NE, AmE and BE. His prognosis is that with the phenomenal expansion of the internet all over the world, mutual intelligibility between these varieties of English will continue to increase. He states that there is no reason for Nigerians to stop using linguistic improvisations when they speak to each other. However, they need to be careful not to use such words outside Nigeria because of possible semantic and cultural ambiguities that could ensue from their usage. It seems reasonable to expect that Nigerians can cause the original meanings of words and phrases to be expanded to accommodate their unique usage patterns. NE may well emerge as a respectable variety of English in the foreseeable future, especially if the country makes substantial economic progress.

Akinjobi (2011) presents the relevance of academic competence to linguistic performance in the use of English intonation tunes in Nigeria. Thirty subjects, who have been exposed to the basic knowledge of Phonetics, English Phonology and Spoken English, and have been considered academically competent enough to be awarded a first degree in the English language and admitted to a Master of Arts in the English language in University of Ibadan were randomly selected for this investigation. They were given some oral production tests on intonation tune assignment. The results revealed the subjects' performance as reflecting that academic competence has little or no effect on the appropriate assignment of intonation tunes in polite requests, complex sentences and attitudinal functions such as surprise, indifference and expression of doubts or uncertainty, and

that the only appropriately used tune is the falling tune followed by the rising tune which has been fairly mastered for polar questions.

Adegbite and Gut (2011) investigates errors of English usage by two generations, older and younger users of educated Nigerian English. Based on a computer-based written language corpus, the syntactic features that are regarded as typical errors in Nigerian English in previous studies were analysed. The occurrences of English and American spellings were also investigated. The results show that most of the syntactic features occur with a very low frequency rate among both groups of speakers and that British and American English spellings are used with varying degrees of frequency in the data.

Akinjobi (2012) discusses diverse opinions on Received Pronunciation and presents an argument in favour of the retention of RP as English pronunciation model for non-native speakers with the support of technology-based non-enculturation sources of practical contact. However, many believe that RP has become an unfeasible ideal for Nigerians because Nigerians are trained by teachers who cannot attain the RP level of proficiency, and in consequence, cannot serve as models to their students. It is glaring that non-native *Englishes* are not homogenous in their variation from standard forms, and proposing a common non-native model for non-native speakers of English might be more unfeasible than aiming to approximate to RP. Nonetheless, communicative competence should be the focus of both teachers and learners. This will aid close approximation to standard forms and promote international intelligibility, which should be the goal in this age of technological compression of the world.

Okpe and Onjewu (2016) observes the causes of the confusion between American English and British English among Educated Nigerian English speakers as a means to evolve the strategies to minimize them. The methodology engaged is the administration of an Essay containing fill-in-the-gaps with options from both British and American English and an unstructured interview. The results reveal that learners are definitely confused between the two varieties of English resulting from American English being a distraction for the British variety. The current study differs as it presents the shades of hindrance Americanism imposes on the spelling consistency of English postgraduate students who are presumably scholars that should possess adequate proficiency and competence in their orthographic usage.

5. Theoretical framework

Error Analysis (EA hereafter) was first established by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late 1970s and became a very popular approach for describing L2 errors. Corder is the father of this theory. He first indicated it in his article, *the significance of learner errors* in 1967 when he mentioned that L2 errors are interesting because they can reflect some of the underlying linguistic rules. His theory came as a result of the severe criticisms which Contrastive Analysis (CA hereafter) received. Hence, a shift of focus from potential errors to the actual committed ones is needed. EA has mainly focused on the actual committed errors by FL/L2 learners and became very popular in the field of applied linguistics. Compared to CA, EA does not only provide a pedagogical orientation but it can also provide a good scientific orientation. It does not make its main focus on input, practice or inductive learning; it focuses generally on linguistic and cognitive processes (Al-Khresheh, 2016).

EA involves a systematic description and classification of L2 errors contained in a sample of learner's speech or writing. EA has challenged the CA on the assumption that FL/L2 learners' errors cannot only be caused by inter-lingual interference from the L1, but they might also be caused due to intra-lingual interference from the Target Language (TL hereafter) itself. In simple words, EA acknowledges interference from L1 as one of the sources of L2 errors, which makes it to some extent related to CA. According to EA, a great number of errors made by FL learners are similar regardless of their MT. Such errors are caused due to intra-lingual interference or transfer. James (1998) claims that such a type of interference from the structures of the TL itself is the main cause of intra-lingual errors. These errors can be created without referring to L1 features. Based on this assumption, EA serves two main purposes: the first one is to provide data from which interferences about the nature of the language learning process can be made. The second one indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the TL students have most difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to communicate (Dulay *et al.* 1982).

EA is carried out in four consecutive stages as stated by Ellis (1994). These stages are collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors and explanation of errors. Errors which are caused by the impact of the MT are called inter-lingual errors. They are defined by Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977:443) as "those caused by the influence of the learner's MT on production of the TL in presumably those areas where languages clearly differ", while the errors which are caused by the effect of the TL itself, are called intra-lingual errors. EA plays a fundamental role in investigating, identifying and

describing FL learners' errors because EA, as a pedagogical technique, is very effective in pinpointing the L2 learners' errors and the causes. EA also contributes to a very comprehensive knowledge about the process of Second Language Acquisition. Thus, this study explores the concept of Americanism and its influence on the linguistic prowess of postgraduate students.

6. Methodology

Thirty subjects who have been exposed to the basic knowledge of English spelling, grammar and usage, and have been considered academically competent to be awarded a first degree in the English language and admitted to a Master of Arts in the English language in the University of Ibadan were randomly selected for this investigation. They were made to listen to some paragraph read and pronounced using the SBE and are required to write what is heard. The paragraph is replete with lexemes with varying spellings in SBE and AmE. The data were subjected to Ellis' (1994) four stages of error analysis namely collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors and explanation of errors.

7. Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collected was subjected to error analysis to determine the competence and the influence of Americanism on the spellings of different words with variants in both British and American English. The control, however, is the Standard British English. Ellis' (1994) four stages of error analysis were employed in identifying, describing and explaining the errors. From the data, seven notable words pose difficulty to the respondents. They are: colour, flavour, manoeuvre, offence, humour, fuelled and leukaemia. These words and their observable variants from the participants are exemplified in the tables below.

Table 1: Varying use of *Manoeuvred* by the respondents

	Word	Variant	Occurrence	Description	Causes
1.	Manoeuvred	Maneuvered	11	Omission of 'o' and misordering of 'vre'	Americanism
2.		Maneouvered	1	Misordering of 'o,e,u' and 'v,r,e'	Incompetence and Americanism
3.		Manoouvered	3	Misordering of 'vre'	Americanism
4.		Manouuvered	4	Omission of 'e' and misordering of 'vre'	Incompetence and Americanism
5.		Manoveured	1	Displacement of 'e,u'	Incompetence
6.		Maneovered	3	Omission of 'u' and misordering of 'e,u' and 'v,r,e'	Incompetence and Americanism
7.		Manouvred	2	Omission of 'e'	Incompetence
8.		Maneouvred	1	Misordering of 'e,o,u'	Incompetence
9.		Manueovered	1	Misordering of 'e,o,u' and 'v,r,e'	Incompetence and Americanism
10.		Maneovred	1	Omission of 'u', misordering of 'e,o'	Incompetence
11.		Manovear	1	Omission of 'e,u', misordering of 'v,r,e' and addition of 'a'	Incompetence
12.		Manoeuvred	1	Correct form	

Table 2: Omission of Letters

	Word	Variant	Occurrence	Description	Causes
	Humour	Humor	4	Omission of 'u'	Americanism
	Colour	Color	1	Omission of 'u'	Americanism
	Offence	Offense	4	Substitution of 'c' for 's'	Americanism
	Flavour	Flavor	1	Omission of 'u'	Americanism
	Fuelled	Fueled	21	Omission of 'L'	Americanism

Table 3: Varying use of *Leukaemia* by the respondents

	Word	Variant	Occurrence	Description	Causes
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1.	Leukaemia	Leukemia	13	Omission of 'a'	Americanism
2.		Lukemia	2	Omission of 'e' and 'a'	Incompetence
3.		Lukemea	1	Omission of 'e', 'a' and substitution of 'l' for 'e'	Incompetence
4.		Lukeamia	1	Omission of 'e'	Incompetence
5.		Luekemia	2	Misordering of 'e' and 'u' and omission of 'a'	Incompetence
6.		Lucamia	1	Omission of 'e' in two different syllabic position, and substitution of 'k' for 'c'	Incompetence
7.		Lukaminea	1	Omission of 'e' in two syllabic positions, addition of 'n' and 'e' at the final position	Incompetence
8.		Leukamia	2	Omission of 'e'	Incompetence
9.		Luekaemia	1	Misordering of 'e' and 'u'	Incompetence
10.		Lukaemia	1	Omission of 'e'	Incompetence
11.		Leukeamia	1	Misordering of 'a' and 'e'	Incompetence
12.		Leukaemia	4	Correct form	

8. Identification of Errors

The errors identified from the data are overt errors as the spellings violate the orthographic pattern in the target language which is the standard British English. In SBE, words like *manoeuvre* end with the *vre* unlike the AmE variety with its *ver* ending. The *oeu* arrangement is used in 'manoeuvre' in SBE while *eu* is used in its AmE counterpart. In the case of humour, flavour and colour, the SBE uses 'ou' as against the AmE which uses *o* singly. In 'leukaemia', there is an 'a' after k in SBE while the same does not apply to the AmE variety. The SBE uses *c* and *ll* in *offence* and *fuelled* respectively while AmE uses *s* and *l*.

Overt errors violate rules in the target language. The variants identified from the thirty participants violate the patterning of words in the target language which is the Standard British English (SBE). In *manoeuvre*, eleven (11) variants are identified. These variants, by virtue of disordering, omission, and displacement violates the pattern of the word in SBE, thereby resulting into variants such as: *maneuvered*, *maneouvered*, *manoeuvered*, *manouvered*, *manoveured*, *maneovered*, *manouvred*, *maneuovred*, *manueovered*, *maneovred* and *manovear*. In *humour*, *colour* and *flavour*, the omission of *u* violates the SBE pattern, thereby resulting into such variants as *humor*, *color* and *flavor*. In *leukaemia*, eleven (11) variants resulting from omission and disordering are observed namely: *leukemia*, *lukemia*, *lukemea*, *lukeamia*, *luekemia*, *lucamia*, *lukaminea*, *leukaemia*, *leukaemia*, *leukaemia* and *leukaemia*. In *offence*, *s* is substituted for *c* thereby resulting to the variant, *offense*. In *fuelled*, *l* is omitted to have *fueled*.

9. Description of Errors

The errors identified in the data are local errors. Local errors are errors that do not hinder the comprehension of the intended meaning between participants. From the spellings of the words, omission, disordering and displacement do not affect the perceived meaning of the word. This is duly accounted for by Chomskyan grammar which postulates that users tap from the same wealth of grammar and are able to understand the intended structure despite their ill-formedness. As such, they are local errors. The errors identified are distinctively described in the tables below.

10. Explanation of Errors

The errors identified and described are intra-lingual errors, as the causes of these errors cannot be found in the structures of the learner's mother tongue. These errors, according to Jiang (2009), are independent of the learner's L1. Americanism and incompetence are the most veritable causes of these intra-lingual errors identified and described. The participants are often exposed to the American variants of English through technological devices often characterized by the American English. This is seen in the spellings of *maneuver*, *humor*, *flavor*, *color*, *leukemia*, *offense* and *fueled* as exemplified in the tables.

It is also observed that the respondents display some levels of incompetence as some of the errors identified are not directly influenced by Americanism. These errors display the lack of competence of the participants in the target language which is the SBE. For example, variants such as *maneuved*, *manovear*, *lukemia*, *lukemea*,

lukeamia, luekemia, lucamia, lukaminea, leukaemia, leukaemia, lukaemia and leukaemia completely deviate from the orthographic pattern of the SBE and have no basis in AmE.

11. Discussion

The academic competence of the Nigerian postgraduate students specializing in English with language emphasis does not reflect in their linguistic performance in distinguishing between the SBE and AmE. There is obvious confusion among respondents' distinction between SBE and AmE as causes advanced for the confusion are plausible and persistent. In the situation of English as a foreign language in Nigeria, learners are confronted with proficiency challenge in the language in order to communicate effectively. By colonization and orientation, SBE is the standard variation. However, with the exposure to the spoken and written forms of AmE as found in textbooks, electronic gadgets, the media and verbal communication in the society, learners are seemingly confused as to which is correct to use, aside the problem of variety identification. This problem may not seem obvious in other disciplines; it comes up often in the English language classroom. More confusion arises at the knowledge that teachers and planners of the Nigerian educational curriculum have both British and American educational backgrounds.

Despite the fact that they have undergone training at undergraduate and postgraduate levels which qualify them to be academically competent, the subjects' performance does not debunk earlier claims that educated Nigerians are confused at the use of SBE and AmE (Kperogi 2010; Adegbite and Gut 2011; Okpe and Onjewu 2016). Consider respondents' varying use of *leukaemia* and *manoeuvred* and the omission and substitution of letters in such words as fuelled, offence, colour, flavour .etc. These intra-lingual errors have been caused by Americanism and perceived incompetence of the respondents. This poses danger for the Nigerian linguistic academy as a degree and a postgraduate degree (in view) in English could not translate to linguistic competence. It should be noted that coupled with being postgraduate students, some of the respondents are also secondary school teachers, journalists, public speakers and research assistants. Other causes of the dual inclination are respondents' exposure to both British and American entertainment industries and access to textbooks written in the UK and the USA. More internet search engines found online are American and are operated in AmE. Institutional library books are mostly outdated; students prefer to go online and have unhindered access to AmE. Excessive workload makes students appreciate the simplicity of the American spelling system when compared to the British.

12. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study concludes that academic competence may not influence English language experts in the consistent use of SBE, though it has been the medium of instruction from secondary school to the postgraduate levels. Therefore, it agrees with Kperogi's submission that Nigerian English expressions, with their combination of the SBE and AmE intricacies, should be expanded and standardised to accommodate their unique usage patterns. Nigerian English may well emerge as a respectable variety of English in the foreseeable future, especially if the country makes substantial economic progress in future (Kperogi 2010).

It is further recommended that if the standardisation of NE seems problematic because of the political and economic upheaval in the country, the interference of the AmE should be minimised. Teachers of English as a foreign language should learn the strategies that could improve the situation and avoid mixing up the two varieties themselves. Courses delineated to explicating distinct written and spoken forms in different varieties of English should be introduced at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It may be extended to students in the other disciplines through the general studies program in the university. The knowledge of this variety difference will guide students-cum-teachers when they consult electronic gadgets and books that utilize AmE. Though it will be too high a goal to aspire a native-like proficiency, there should be consistency in the use of a variety and get close to attaining international intelligibility.

Note

The authors speak Standard British English and will therefore use British rather than English spelling in this paper.

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