THE NOUN PHRASE STRUCTURE IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have described Nigerian English in different ways. While some see it as a language that is evolving from a bilingual/multilingual background with influences from multiple languages, some see it as a deviation from the norm (and therefore a body of institutionalised errors): the former, from the perspective of a foreign or L2 speaker; the latter, from the perspective of a native speaker. Nevertheless the arguments for the existence of Nigerian English are quite convincing. It is therefore necessary to codify the grammar of the evolving language. Based on the data generated from newspapers, scholarly works in English and speeches recorded from the broadcast media, this study explains the grammatical/syntactic structure of the Noun Phrase in Nigerian English. Using a simple descriptive method, this paper discusses the Noun Phrase structure of Nigerian English from the perspective of accommodation rather than deviation. This idea (of accommodation) makes it possible to adduce reasons for the occurrence of specific structures and identify errors which are not products of language contact.

1. Introduction

Since Nigeria was colonised by Britain, it is logical that despite the incursions of other English speaking nationals, especially Americans, the dominant language will be British English; and this is what people often aim at. However, due to the American influence in terms of books, media coverage, films, and human traffic to and from America (by Nigerians and Americans) traces of American English can now be found in the already established British English enclave (Bamgbose 1995: 23; Igboanusi 2001: 363, 2003: 601). Nevertheless, many Nigerians still use British English; and both regional and national examination bodies (West African Examinations Council and National Examinations Council) recognise the British standard variety, but tolerate the American variety provided candidates are consistent in the use of either of the two in their

written compositions. In addition, at examination marking centres, certain expressions sometimes made in students' essays are attributed to Nigerian English. In this vein, therefore, Standard British English serves as the norm while other variants are deviations. This paper shall explore the Nigerian English variety with its peculiarities. To elucidate our discussions, however, references may be made to Standard British English.

Scholarship in English studies in Nigeria threw up a controversy in the late 60s and the 70s as to the existence of the Nigerian variety of English. Prominent among the advocates of the existence of Nigerian English were linguists such as Banjo (1971), Bamgbose (1971), and Adetugbo (1979a, 1979b). However, a major dissenting view came from Salami (1968) and Adesanoye (1973), who insisted that structures that did not conform to the rules of Standard British English be regarded as errors. In this sense individual creations must conform to the thinking in Standard British English; otherwise, they will be considered to be aberrant. Furthermore, Omamor (2004), Adesanoye (2004), and Fakoya (2004) have had cause to doubt the standard of English being used by different categories of people (including academics). Their judgement is that English as spoken and written in Nigeria is full of errors. However, while the first two discuss Standard English in particular, Fakoya's study is within the precincts of Nigerian English. In concluding his paper, he advises that the errors be separated from Nigerian English.

From the foregoing, we can discern two different groups or positions: advocates of Standard English and advocates of Nigerian English. In regard to the status of Nigerian English, the first group considers it as DEVIATION from the norm, while the second group sees it as ACCOMMODATION; i.e. a variety that incorporates the peculiarities of the host community. We shall discuss these fully in section 3. In what follows, we shall discuss data collection (section 2), accommodation and deviation (section 3) before we proceed to the analyses of some structures in Nigerian English (section 4).

2. Data collection

The data used for this study were collected from three principal sources. The first source, *Nigerian Tribune's* and *Vanguard's Mr & Mrs* cartoons, contain informal conversations between individuals. The cartoons were chosen because they represent the average Nigerian speaker of English (since the cartoon is meant for the ordinary Nigerian anyway). It is palpable to thinking that the language has to match the level of the audience to make people understand the meaning of the cartoon. The second is a book on error analysis jointly written by David Jowitt (a native speaker and scholar of English studies) and Vincent Nnamoni, a Nigerian scholar of English studies. And the third is *Kaduna Boy* (1991), an autobiographical novel written by a Nigerian: the late Chief Bola Ige

(Senior Advocate of Nigeria), a former judge of the International Court at The Hague, a former state Governor and a former federal minister of Nigeria. The book, which was published after the author left office as Governor, was chosen because of his professional and political achievements. Our observation is that despite the author's achievements, the deviant language of the novel may not pass unnoticed by effective users of Standard English. In addition to these, data were collected from live discussions by people in offices and on different programmes on radio and television.

The data were closely examined and three categories of expressions were discovered. In the first group were outright errors which the researcher considered unacceptable; the second contained expressions of the status of the standard British or American English; and the third were those we would refer to as the Nigerian version of English. In this paper, the third aspect is analysed using a simple descriptive method to bring out the distinctive syntactic features of Nigerian English Noun Phrase structure. We begin with the concepts of deviation and accommodation.

3. Deviation or accommodation?

The norm is generally defined as the approved pattern, the model, the conventional or the standard variety. It serves as a yardstick for measuring conformity with the standard and it is the form that other people aim at. In this respect, a variety that does not conform to the norm is assumed to be deviant. Such deviance is often considered as an error. This explains why the deviant forms of English used in Nigeria are often tagged errors. Although the standard variety is desirable, it has generally been observed that Nigerian speakers of English with a foreign accent are often stigmatised in society. By the same token, the varieties of English being used in Nigeria have been described as "bookish", "stiff", "inflexible" and "inelegant" (Adetugbo 1979a: 149; Omolewa 1979: 14). Yet, deviations from the Standard English norm are interpreted as errors. The average Nigerian user of the English language, therefore, has a task of avoiding the errors and "sounding Nigerian".

To achieve this, one may resort to accommodation. Accommodation can be described as a compromise, agreement or adjustment. This implies the concept of hospitality, the necessity to recognise as typical and adopt for use some peculiar syntactic structures from the varieties of English being spoken in Nigeria. It involves the incorporation into English (the Nigerian variety) of the more regular and more enduring features that occur in the community. This is very important because, despite the fact that we can pursue a goal of achieving absolute perfection in Standard British English, our mother tongue and other hindrances may not make the objective realisable. We shall continue to have interferences from mother tongues; individual learners will create novel and "Nigerianised"

expressions (they can coin new words, customise traditional proverbs and say-ings, create new idioms, etc. Adegbija 2004: 23-26); and of course institutional-ised errors may prove difficult to extirpate. In addition, it appears that the users of Nigerian English find it more convenient than Standard English because it is closer to their indigenous languages just like Pidgin is.

Consequently, the position adopted in this paper is that deviant features may be acceptable or unacceptable. When they contravene the rules setting up a standard language, such that the meaning of the language is impaired or the language becomes unintelligible, they are unacceptable. If on the other hand, the intended audience understands perfectly what the speaker says, we may say that the deviation is acceptable. Adekunle (1979: 28) has made a similar obser-vation. He argues that:

> [T]hough each language is a system in itself, languages tend to share some com-mon features, frequently referred to as structural universals. It has also to be real-ized that because not every element of contrast in languages is so significant as to influence comprehension some degree of variation exist (sic) among the various dialects of all languages. This intralinguistic variations (sic) do not, except in ex-treme cases, prevent mutual intelligibility… A divergent language form is one in which there is such reorganization of the basic structural components of the stan-dard form of the languages that a new pattern emerges
>
> (Adekunle 1979: 28).

In the case of Nigerian English, the basic structural form is not reorganised. The structure of the basic sentence is still SPCA; that of the NP is still *m*, *h* and *q*; the complex and the compound sentences are also at par with what obtains in Standard English. Moreover, the variety is understandable to the speakers and the Nigerian audience; and as the data will show later in this paper, the non-Nigerian audience may not miss anything in the meanings of expressions.

Bamgbose (2004: 612) has also noted that:

> [I]n considering the possible sources of nativization, it is natural to first turn to the L1 of a speaker, since it is one language that the speaker can relate to the acquired English language. In actual fact nativization may be traced to two sources: Non-L1 innovation, a generalising process that cannot primarily be traced to an L1 source and L1 innovation, which is either directly traceable to an L1 source or as a secondary development from such a source. L1 innovation is an important way of ensuring standardization, it is a productive process that transcends the first lan-guage background
>
> (Bamgbose 2004: 612).

This means that both features of the L1 and Non-LI innovations are relevant in discussing the features of Nigerian English. Hence it may be necessary to ac-commodate some of these features into the grammar of Nigerian English. Fur-

thermore, since the domestication of English in Nigeria involves lexis (coin-ages, borrowings, direct translation), idioms, semantics, and pragmatics (Adeg-bija 2004: 23), it might be pretentious to say that certain grammatical influences of local languages amount to errors.

Many reasons can be adduced for the need to accommodate the deviant grammatical structures. The purist sees Nigerian English as deviation simply be-cause the features of the variety are not conventional and are at variance with the standard. This need not be so if we realise that even in England there are different varieties of English such as Cockney, Scottish and Dutch. This is despite their descent from the same root (Baugh and Cable 1951). Perhaps we need to recall Adetugbo's (1979b: 169) observation that a variety need not be identical with a standard language. Really, the deviations make the difference! In Nigeria, where the flora and fauna differ, where the people and their ways of life differ, and where there are a multitude of languages and language clusters, we should expect that the English language, which is a second language to the majority of its users in Nigeria, will differ at different linguistic levels, grammar inclusive.

Again the concept of dialects implies that each variety will have peculiarities in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. The grammar of a second language can be influenced by that of the indigenous language (possibly Bamgbose's 2004: 612 LI innovation) simply because the speaker has more facility in the first language/mother tongue.

Given the foregoing, the grammar of Nigerian English needs to reflect the different aspects of its usage. This, however, must be based on regularity of occurrence and intelligibility to the audience.

4. Noun Phrase patterns in Nigerian English

The phrase is described as a group of words which has a key word. The key word is the head of that phrase and the other words in the phrase only modify it (Kuiper and Allan 1996: 215-217; Dennis 1996: 22). It is also possible to have a word in place of a phrase, but that word must be the head or key word that can function in that position. Furthermore, such heads can be pre- or post-modified by other items. The noun phrase is a group of words that has a noun as its key word or head. Tomori (1976: 58) notes that a head of an English noun phrase can be pre-modified by up to twelve elements each occurring in particular positions which are exclusive to oth-ers, (though this sort of modification does not occur very often). In Nigerian Eng-lish, the head can also be modified in both ways (pre- and post).

In addition, contrary to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 19) and McArthur (1996: 310), two determiners of the same kind can pre-modify a noun head in Nigerian English. The following sentences are common in Nigerian English, despite the structure of their NPs (the relevant portions are in italics):

1) a. I like *this your shirt.* (SBE … 'this shirt of yours').
   b. *That my brother* does not take nonsense. (SBE: 'That brother of mine…').

What obtains here is a rendition of the English phrases with the indigenous language background. While the two determiners that modify the head noun are barred in Standard English, their translation equivalents are acceptable in Yorùbá as in the following: *aṣọọ rẹ yìí* [lit. 'cloth your this'; Standard English = 'this cloth of yours']. Thus the idea of double determiners modifying a head is a feature of the Nigerian English NP. Notice, however, that this does not affect the structure of the NP: while the English NP is head-last (the head of the phrase occurs after the modifiers), the Yorùbá NP is head-first (the head occurs before all modifiers).

In some instances, however, the indefinite article can modify the head where Standard English would exclude it and exclude it where Standard English would include it. Consider (2) in which no specific *mosque* or *bank* is intended and (3) where the objects are countable:

2) a. I am going to *the mosque*.
   b. He went to *the bank*.

3) a. He cut his fingers with *knife*.
   b. She went to buy *pen*.

What this shows is that in some cases, Nigerian English may not indicate/show any difference between the definite, the indefinite and the generic references to nouns on the one hand, and the countable and the uncountable nouns on the other.

This last item possibly accounts for the occurrence in Nigerian English of plural marking on such words as *furnitures*, *informations* and *aircrafts*. For instance, the use of *equipments* is attested in Jowitt (1991: 29) and Okoro (2004: 174-175). Banjo (1996: 121) notes that Nigerian creative writers have assisted a lot in entrenching the foothold of Nigerian English; however, I have not been able to find any of the foregoing words or the expressions in (1)-(3) in any literary work. Perhaps, since they often occur in spoken discourse and in newspaper reports, they (especially the plural marking on collective nouns) can be seen as exhibiting features of informal English usage in Nigeria.

Another feature of the NP in Nigerian English is the order of the first person pronoun and the third person noun in a conjoined NP. The Nigerian English structure has pronoun + N word order, a converse of the acceptable Standard English order of N + pronoun in subject positions of sentences. Thus, sentences like the following sometimes occur:

4) a. *I and my brother* will come (Adekunle 1979: 33).
   b. I asked why *I and Dele* were carried like babies (Ige 1991: 9).
   c. *I and some other children…* (Ige 1991: 1).

In Standard English, the expectation is that the personal pronoun *I* will be the last part of the conjoined noun phrase such that (2b) and (2c) above will respectively read *Dele and I* and *some other children and I*. This feature also occurs in conversations by Nigerian speakers. It is possible, as Adekunle has also noted, that this is due to the influence of the indigenous languages.

The use of double NPs also occurs in Nigerian English. Although the use of emphatic pronouns after a personal pronoun is acceptable in Standard English, the order in (5) and (6) is peculiar to Nigerian English. While sentence (5) was produced by an adult speaker, (6) was produced by a pupil in a university staff school, who obviously had been taught to clap for herself and conclude this activity with the statement. While we may wave this aside as "baby talk", this perhaps prepares her for the acquisition of the Nigerian variety of English. Again, pronouns are usually not modified in Standard English. However, the use of two personal pronouns in the same subject position occurs in Nigerian English as in (7) and (8).

5) *Myself I* saw the judge.
6) *Myself* God bless *me.*
7) M*e I* can't take that from any woman o (*Nigerian Tribune*, 16/12/2004).
8) *Me I* don't know o. ('As for me, I don't know.')

This feature is not common in written works. For instance in the course of data collection, I found only one case in a cartoon published in *Nigerian Tribune* a Nigerian national newspaper. Yet several Nigerians use forms like (7) and (8) in spoken discourse, but no other personal pronoun combinations have been attested in this variety.

Sometimes, however, a personal pronoun or a noun may be post-modified by a noun (*people* is often used) which is a reduced relative clause as in (5).

9) a. We work day and night just to satisfy *you people* (*Vanguard*, 22/09/03).
   b. I will contest if *my people* still want me.
   c. *You people* should do something about my case.
   d. The *Jesus people* have come again (Christian religious programme on radio 14/3/2004).
   e. The *traditional people* may not like it (Talk show on radio, 20/01/04).
   f. Those *Tapa people…* (Ige 1991*:* 10).

The use of one word *people* shows relative clause reduction. This is very similar to what occurs in Standard English. We should note that *You people* is a common phrase in Nigerian English. It is especially common in informal discourse when a speaker addresses colleagues or subordinates. *You* in this sense might be considered, for purposes of meaning, as a pronoun of power or of solidarity (following Brown and Gilman 1962). The literal interpretation of *you people* in (9a) is 'you that are people'. However, the intended but hidden meaning is 'you ungrateful people'. This shows power just as (9b) and (9c) show solidarity with the meaning of 'loving people that will vote' and 'you that are close to me'.

The other dimension of the meaning of *people* is somewhat derogatory since the speaker is usually not a member of the religious group. In (9d) it means 'preachers about Jesus' (i.e. Christians); in (9e) it means 'believers in traditional religion'; and in (9f) the speaker looks down on the people. These different combinations with *people* are used to depict different shades of meaning in discourse.

In addition, Nigerian English users tend to ignore the case distinctions of personal pronouns especially when used after the preposition *between.* Consider:

10) a. Between *you* and *I*, the boy is a thief.
    b. *Me* and *him* will go.
    c. *Me and Shola* will do it.

In these examples, Standard English would prefer *between you and me*; *he and I* and *Shola and I* respectively. These forms, however, also occur in Nigerian English.

Another pronoun with a peculiar feature is *they*. *They* functions as the subject in the following sentences; but the meaning differs in each case. Witness (7).

11) a. *They* have stolen my pen.
    b. *They* have arrested him.
    c. *They* said that John would be arrested.

In (11a) *they* has no distinct referent. Rather, it refers to an unidentifiable person. This is the intended meaning, but in the Standard English interpretation, *they* would mean 'a group of people' (which, considering the value of a pen, would be ludicrous). However, *they* might also mean a collective, such that in (11b) the use of *they* with *arrested* implies that a group of policemen effected the arrest. Finally *they* in (11c) is ambiguous between the interpretations of the first two examples. It might be a product of mere hearsay or a definite statement by some authority that cannot be personified. In Nigerian English therefore, the context of the occurrence of *they* determines its meaning.

Another occurrence of pronouns is at constituent boundaries (such as Noun Phrase or clause boundary) where they intrude as in (8).

12) a. The women themselves, *they* wear trousers.
    b. My father, *he* works for a mining company (Jowitt and Nnamoni 1985: 48).
    c. People who *their* power is great should use it wisely (Jowitt and Nnamoni 1985: 51).

The pronoun *they* refers to the subject of the sentence, but it is redundant in this position. As (12b) shows such intrusion is not peculiar to *they* but extends to other pronouns. Perhaps, we may take these to be instances of dislocation in which, for purposes of emphasis an extracted NP leaves behind a resumptive pronoun residue (Emonds 1976: 32). Example (12c) differs from the earlier two. First *their* is not redundant, and second it is not a product of dislocation. Rather, it is used in lieu of the Standard English possessive form of the relative pronoun, *whose*. Thus Nigerian English has *who their* to satisfy the needs of the possessive form of the relative pronoun. We need to know that these features resemble those of the mother tongue; thus it is possible that they are products of the indigenous languages' influence.

Two Standard English reflexive pronouns are also current in Nigerian English, though with deviant usage. These are *ourselves* and *themselves.* Consider (13).

13) a. Though they are brother and sister, they do not love *themselves* (Jowitt and Nnamoni 1985: 50).
    b. Unselfishness means that we should love *ourselves* (Jowitt and Nnamoni 1985: 51).
    c. My wife and I *never knew ourselves* before we got married (University teacher (May, 2004). [In Standard English: 'My wife and I never had coital relationship/carnal knowledge of each other/ made love to each other before we got married'.]

In (13a) Standard English will prefer the reciprocal pronoun *each other* and in (13b) either of *each other* or *one another* is considered appropriate. However, as the examples remain, their intended meanings are understood by the average user of Nigerian English. Nevertheless, the Standard English problem with the sentences is semantic, not syntactic. This can be confirmed from (13c).

Bamgbose (1995: 21) has noted that offence might be given if people's full titles are not attached to the names. This is in line with the culture of respect that is prevalent in Nigerian society, especially among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. This is perhaps why each name in Nigerian English usage usually has a title or appellation. Here are a few examples:

14) a. Sister Oni (Ige 1991: 2)
    b. Brother Teacher (Ige 1991: 142)
    c. Daddy Okeowo (Ige 1991: 250)

15) a. Baba Moradeke (Ige 1991: 3)
        'Moradeke's father'
    b. Iya Folorunsho (Ige 1991: 3)
        'Folorunsho's mother'
    c. Magajin Gari (Ige 1991: 17)
        'town head'

In Nigerian society, especially the Yoruba, respect for elders is a highly valued moral etiquette. Being an "elder" in the last sentence may not be more than being some months or a year older than another person. This is the spirit behind (14a) and (14b). Such a "junior" person has to pay due respect to the "elder" in the society even if they are not blood relations. Thus in the autobiographical novel from which the examples above were taken, a primary school pupil addresses members of his household with honorific titles *Sister*, *Brother*, and *Daddy* even when they are not blood relations. In (15) there are pure Yoruba names (a) and (b) and Hausa expressions (c). These are the normal 'names' by which the referents are addressed – older people are called or referred to by the names of their children (15a) and (15b) or their titles (15c).

Another peculiarity is in the deliberate avoidance of Standard English kinship terms. Consider (16):

16) a. his children's children (Ige 1991: 149)
    b. my mother's father (Ige 1991: 149)
    c. anybody's mother (Ige 1991: 61)

The first two examples are peculiarly Nigerian. Rather than use *grandchildren* or *grandfather* which are preferred in Standard English, the author of *Kaduna Boy* used the examples above. We should, however, note that these structures are not peculiar to children alone; rather when trying to explain some things or relationships, adult speakers do use similar forms.

Finally, there are occasions when the subject of a sentence is not phonetically realised. In this sense, the subject position is empty as is the case of the imperative sentence in Standard English. In Nigerian English, apart from imperative sentences, negative sentences often lack subjects. The following examples are representative of the phenomenon.

17) a. No problem.
    b. No entry.
    c. No thoroughfare/road.

18) a. Not on seat.
    b. Not at home.

While (17) exemplifies the non-realisation of the pleonastic element *there*, in (18) the subject, a third person singular item, is not realised. The following are the full realisations of the intended sentences in (17) and (18):

19) a. There is no problem.
    b. There should be no entry.
    c. There is no thoroughfare.

20) a. He/She is not on seat.
    b. He/She is not at home.

There are probably many sources for the form in (17) and (18). We can locate one in the formal court proceedings: *Guilty or Not guilty*? However, since only a negligible proportion of Nigerians attend court proceedings, we cannot say that this form was borrowed from the court. Another source is the informal variety of English language. The question again is: how many have access to colloquial English? The third source, which is most likely to be the original source that is assisted by the other sources is the mother tongue. Scholars have noted that negative constructions in Yoruba-English code-switching (Lamidi 2003: 218-219) and the third person singular subject in Yoruba (Awobuluyi 2004: 352) may not have phonetically realised subjects. The empty subject position, therefore, is probably the source of the empty subject of negative sentences in Nigerian English.

5. Conclusion

Having looked at some aspects of the noun phrase in Nigerian English, we realise that there are major grammatical and semantic differences between the NP in Standard English and the NP in Nigerian English. Although many of these features presented here may not enjoy popular acceptance by all (Okoro 2004 discusses this problem), it is possible that these structures will continue to be used in Nigeria at the informal level. It is also possible that some of the informal features presented here will be accommodated into standard Nigerian English.

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