

# The Domestication of the English Language for Literary Purpose in Nigeria: Creating a National Identity

Dare Owolabi

**Abstract**—Nigeria is, obviously, one of the largest ESL users in the world. The language that first came with the colonial masters as a foreign language has since grown in leaps and bounds to now become a second language and, unarguably, the country's official language. As the largest black nation in the world, Nigeria, using English as the official language, has affected the language in a way that has created a Nigerian identity that is fast becoming a variety of English as an international language. This variety of English, which I refer to as *Niglish* has international intelligibility, having been used by Nigerian writers to win international awards. This study examines how the English language has been nativized in the Nigerian environment for literary purpose, using selected works from recent literary artists in Nigeria and by Nigerians. The paper identifies the Nigerianness in the use of English in the works of the writers examined to show how these writers manage to maintain a balance between local color and international intelligibility and acceptability. The corpora for this study were selected and grouped under transliteration, interference and importation of L1 lexicon, leading to switching and mixing of code. Phonology has been deliberately left out of this study for the obvious reason that non-native adult second language English users are not known to have acceptable competence of native speakers in the spoken aspect of language. Besides, only written works were examined. The study concludes that the assessment of any regional variety of English, such as Nigerian English should be endonormative rather than exonormative, bearing in mind local peculiarities, and particularly creative and pragmatic use of the language.

**Index Terms**—Domestication of english, language for specific purpose, literary purpose, local color, national identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The English language has become very dominant in Nigeria that it will be an aberration, because of its non-indigenous nature, to still regard it as foreign. It has fully entrenched itself as a permanent member of the nation's linguistic family. Since its adoption as not only a second language, but also as the official linguistic medium in the country, its influence has continued to spread, in almost every sphere of the nation's life. The English language in use in Nigeria is, however, different from the one used as yardsticks for Standard English, but it is, nonetheless, intelligible and not in any way inferior to any other variety, by linguistic standards. Nigeria, indisputably, one of the largest populations of speakers of English as second language in the world (Akere, 2009; Jowitt, 2009), now uses the language with some measure of dexterity that may soon

amaze native speakers. It is a well-known fact that many Nigerian writers have received accolades globally on account of their literary prowess in the English language medium. For example Nigerian born Wole Soyinka, is the first African Nobel Laureate in literature. With the attainment of this status, it is high time true recognition be accorded the emerging variety of English in Nigeria, which has been successfully domesticated, by the way the language has been and is still being 'home-grown...adapted and tamed to suit the Nigerian environment' (Adegbija, 2004). Dynamism is one of the characteristics of any living language, and the different varieties of English emerging from different parts of the world today are a testimony to the vibrancy of the language. Creativity, as a language feature, has greatly influenced these emerging varieties of English in the world, and this is also a factor that has helped midwife the Nigerian variety of English; a variety that has helped Nigerians express their world view, their own way. In addition, pragmatism as a way of responding to immediate situation through the English language medium has led to what Omolewa (1979: 14-15) calls 'working English'. This is, however, different from the wide spread Pidgin English, which continues to serve as the linguistic bridge across the murky waters of linguistic Babel in Nigeria. Apart from the fact that Pidgin is greatly influenced by the immediate local languages, thus making uniformity difficult, it is restricted to big cities and towns and common among the proletariat. The emerging Nigerian English is not heavily dependent on indigenous languages. According to Igboanusi (2002:4), 'NE has its origin in British English, and the lexicon of NE has therefore shown a strong British influence'. In other words, while Pidgin is common among the uneducated and spoken by the educated when they want to condescend or for an effect, NE is spoken by the educated and the level of education determines the variety of NE used by individuals.

Although English, as used by Nigerians, may not, and cannot, be the same, as that used by those who have the language as their mother tongue, the Nigerian attempt at domesticating the language to suit domestic purposes is, no doubt, fast becoming a variety. To that extent NE should be seen as an acceptable departure from the rules in diction, pronunciation or from what is generally regarded as the standard, but possessing mutual intelligibility even at international level. The contact of English with indigenous languages in Nigeria has some effects on the English language. Summarizing Alamin A. Mazrui (2004), Akere (2009:3), defines domestication of English as 'the transformation of English as an alien medium, to make it

Manuscript received August 7, 2012; revised November 20, 2012.

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respond to local imagery, figures of speech, sound patterns and the general cultural milieu of the region'. Nigerian writers are known to exhibit instances of Nigerianism in their use of English and these deviations have not been known to inhibit international intelligibility.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Having attained the status of a global language, English, no doubt, is bound to have different varieties, probably reflecting local nuances, but nonetheless mutually intelligible, and so, the language is no longer the exclusive preserve of the British Isles, from where it originated. English is now spoken in almost all continents of the world, although in different forms that are, however, unarguably identifiable with the language in its home base, leading to what is now commonly referred to as World English. Nigerian English is one form of the so called World English, with clearly identifiable features that are peculiar to it as a member of the Outer Circle. These forms are different, especially in its phonological aspect from that of the Inner Circle but to some extent closer to the Inner Circle than the varieties in the Expanding Circle. So this study is conceived along the Indian-American scholar, Braj Kachru's theory of the Concentric Circle. Nigerian English, like other varieties spoken in former British colonies, especially in Africa belongs to the Outer Circle, with features that are clearly identifiable with the particular region in the Outer Circle. The variety of English found in the texts for this study, is the type that shows Nigerian local colour and cultural nuances.

## III. LANGUAGES AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria has no one single language that can be regarded as the nation's language. Different communities or group of communities have one language or the other peculiar to them. These numerous languages have no place in official and educational matters. Even where official recognition is accorded three major languages that represent the three major regions viz: Hausa in the Northern part, Igbo in the South Eastern part and Yoruba in the South Western part, they are only used in matters of culture.

The Nigerian linguistic situation necessitates the adoption of a non-partisan linguistic code for the benefit of all, and this responsibility falls on the language English since no indigenous language can be used as a national language. So many reasons have been put forward for the adoption of English, a non-indigenous language, as Nigeria's lingua franca. Some of these include:

- Fear of political domination, if any indigenous language is selected no matter how good intentioned;
- Avoiding the India's experience, where the choice of Hindi was reported to have led to riots in many non-Hindi speaking regions (Yule, 2007);
- Lack of infrastructure, such as teachers, books and other learning resources, for any selected language;

- Lack of political will to push through any of the indigenous languages, arising from (i) above;
- The language that has come to fill the bill, which is English, is seen by many as a unifying force in the turbulent linguistic terrain.
- This language has since attained the status of a second language and many of the younger generations are now effective bilinguals.

The English language used in Nigeria is now referred to as Nigerian English, which is the nativized form of the Standard English. The language is used in a peculiar fashion to suit Nigerians' purpose and in such a way that 'as a domestic servant does what the master requires...English in Nigeria is now made to do precisely what Nigerians want it to do' (Adegbija, 2004:20). This is exactly what Sinclair (1988:3) has also noted about native speakers' loss of control over English when it is said that: 'the English language has been so successfully exported round the world that the native speakers no longer have control over it'. In a nutshell, Nigerian English is the form Okoro (2004:167) classifies as '...English the way Nigerians speak and write it!' with its peculiarities which do not seriously obstruct international intelligibility.

## IV. LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES: GIVING VALUE TO ENGLISH IN ESL ENVIRONMENT

The specific purpose to which language is put is what actually gives value to language; otherwise language will be of little value. The major value of language is its being used to achieve a communicative purpose. Crocker (1981:8) says what characterizes language for specific purpose (LSP) more than anything else is the value it places upon language as a means rather than as an end in itself. ESP, as an offshoot of LSP, is '...generally used to refer to the teaching/learning of a foreign language for a clearly utilitarian purpose... not as an end in itself but as an essential means to clearly identifiable goal' (Mackay, 1978:2). One major purpose of literature is to entertain, and this is why this study is on the use of English in Nigerian literature. The ESP's popular slogan, "Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need" (Hutchinson & Waters (1987:8), is the basis of our examination of the use to which the English language has been put by literary artists in Nigeria. These writers know what Nigerians need English for and, have, to a large extent, domesticated the English language for that purpose in literature works.

## V. NIGERIAN WRITERS' PECULIAR USE OF ENGLISH FOR LITERARY PURPOSE

What we examine in this section is the way Nigerian writers use the English language for the specific needs of Nigerians, but which nonetheless will still pass the test of international intelligibility. In other words, these writers are rooted in Nigeria in their linguistic choice, but they spread their messages, like tree branches, to other parts of the world, where some of them have won one award or the

other. In this study, the data presented are grouped under the following headings: transliteration, interference and importation of L1 lexicon, leading to code switching and mixing. The data for this study come from three recent novels by Nigerian novelists: Lola Soneyin, *The Secrete Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (TSLBSW) (2010), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (PH) (2006) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (HYS) (2006).

**Transliteration:** By transliteration here we mean direct translation of an expression in L1 to L2, such that the structure of L1 is so domineering that the resultant expression in L2 appears strange. Below are some examples from the novels selected for this study.

Thank you for returning our mouth to the matter at hand my friend (5) (TSLBSW)

The above expression is unlikely in Standard English, the equivalent of which is likely to be Thank you for bringing us back to the matter at hand (my friend). What is evident here is that there has been a digression, to which one of the discussants is trying to steer others back on course, to the subject matter from which they had detoured.

...he hoisted himself onto his feet using the bedpost for support and prayed that morning would wake them well (14) (TSLBSW).

Although the expression morning would wake them well may occur in Standard English as a figurative expression (personification), which is not the sense in which it is used here. It is a literal way of wishing that the next morning will be well.

Has this woman's head scattered that she now scrubs my mouth? (62) (TSLBSW).

This is an expression that is not likely to have an equivalent in Standard English to express the real thought. The closest paraphrase that we can have to express the thought is: Is this woman insane that she now argues with me?

Let me tell you one of the things I did. Laughter kills me when I think of it (67) (TSLBSW).

The expression Laughter kills me, in Standard English can be paraphrased "I laughed hysterically", but expressed this way in a Nigerian novel for this category of audience, will not carry the expected weight. So for the purpose of the expected weight, it has to be transliterated from the L1, and it is understood from the background of L1.

My daughters were born with eyes in their stomachs so they are quick to digest all that they see...Like I said, they have eyes in their stomachs (88) (TSLBSW)

The expression, eyes in their stomachs, which means to be discernible, is not what can be understood for people who are used to Standard English. It has been specifically used for the purpose of literature in the novel.

They have taken him! They have taken him! (45) (PH) Our people say that the chorus sounds like...

They say the Sardauna sounded like that when he was begging them not to kill him (130) (HYS)

As a transliteration from an indigenous language, in the active voice, it means the object of the sentence has been taken (arrested), and would have been better rendered in this passive voice. In many Nigerian indigenous languages, when the performer of an action is unknown, it is expressed as in the example above, as the passive voice does not exist

in many of the indigenous languages.

**Interference:** This is a common feature in any language contact situation, as second language users impose the structure of L1 on L2. The structural transfer of L1 to L2 by Nigerian writers is one of the ways of domesticating the English language to express Nigerians' world view in an international language. Interference is a common feature in the use of English by Nigerians, as the L1 structures bear heavily on L2. In some of the recent Nigerian novels from which this study draws its data, the following examples demonstrate the phenomenon of interference that occurs in the English language in contact with some Nigerian languages.

My mother despised her; she said the woman had the disease of the eye: everything she sees, she wanted (121) (TSLBSW)

The disease of the eye, as used in the novel for the purpose of literature, is not the type that requires the attention of an oculist. In Nigerian English, in contact with the Yoruba language, it means "greed", "avarice", and "covetousness". This meaning is not hidden from Nigerian users of English as a second language, but may be strange to those used to only Standard English.

Iya Femi picked me up with her eyes and threw me to the floor (55) (TSLBSW)

The expression above is a direct transfer from the structure of L1. Although the expression is metaphorical, it is not likely to be understood by anybody not intelligible in the writer's first language. In fact, its Standard English rendition is difficult. The closest we can have, but which is not likely to carry the weight required is "Femi's mother despised me".

Now you want to remove yourself (56) (TSLBSW)

The Standard English version of this expression is: "Now you want to exonerate yourself". This is a typical case of both transliteration and interference.

Those flies in the kitchen sah, they are a sign of bad medicine from the dibia. Somebody has done bad medicine. The flies, sah. It means somebody has done bad medicine for this house (215&216) (HYS)

The above is another case of the interference of L1 structure on L2. The expression bad medicine from the dibia as used in the novel can be translated in Standard English to mean "diabolic object from an herbalist".

Sister, but it is funny, oh...Because of too much Book, you no longer know how to laugh (130) (HYS)

As a case of interference, the L1 structure is evident in the expression which in Standard English may be rendered "much learning has made you too sober".

L1 lexicon infusion leading to code mixing and code switching: Code mixing and code switching are natural outcomes when languages are in contact. These are common features in many Nigerian novels and very evident in the novels used for this study. In these novels there are cases of infusion of L1 lexicons, too numerous to mention. They include:

- names of food items: He pulled the stool towards his crotch and proceeded to demolish the mountain of amala, morsel by morsel, catching every string of ewedu that dripped down his wrist with his tongue (9) (TSLBSW)

- greetings: 'It has been nice talking to you, jisie ike', he said (152) (HYS)
- questions: Ke kwanu? I asked when he came in (30) (PH)
- Kedu? She asked (22) (HYS)
- deities: She thought I would die in hospital but Eledumare did not permit it (144) (TSLBSW)
- pleas: Come and help me, biko (16) (PH)

All the novels, like many other Nigerian novels are replete with cases of infusion of L1 lexicons, leading to code mixing. This is only possible for the purpose of literature as other forms of writings by Nigerians cannot permit this. There are also cases of code switching in these novels and also evident in many Nigerian novels.

- Yes. Chukwu du anyi. God led us (94) (HYS)
- Madu! Is this you? O gi di ife a? (139) (HYS)
- Eyin Iyawo o ni m'eni (102) (TSLBSW)

#### VI. SEMANTICS AND INTELLIGIBILITY IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH

As noted by Finch (2000:2) "the bread and butter' of most linguistics...is the study of phonology, syntax and semantics" and semantics operates at two grammatical ranks of word and sentence. Finch goes on to say that at word rank, semanticists explore the relationships which words have with each other within the language as a whole which constitutes their sense; in other words, the meaning which a word has by virtue of its place in the linguistic system. In essence, obvious cases of Nigerianism that identify NE will not likely constitute any semantic hindrance, especially in Written Nigerian English (WNE). That is to say that there is less likelihood of lack of mutual intelligibility in WNE even to native speakers or those used to Standard English, notwithstanding that words and expressions are used in unconventional manner. Even when L1 lexicon items are used alongside Standard English words, leading to code mixing or outright code switching, this does not hinder intelligibility, as the context of such words provide the required meaning.

If syntax, is 'the study of grammatical relations between words and other units within the sentence' (Matthews, 2005:368), NE cannot be said to be different in any way from the British or American standard. This has to be so because 'there are certain aspects of the grammar of English, as spoken internationally which any diatopic variety interferes with at its own peril' (Banjo, 1996:74). Speaking in the same vein, Adegbiya (2004:27) says 'to a very large extent, the grammar of English in Nigeria is still in conformity with the grammar of native varieties of English'. Only syntactic distortions can impair intelligibility, not only internationally but even locally. With syntactic structure intact and almost on a par with British and American standard, the special use of English for literary purpose in Nigeria is to achieve special effects, such as giving the use of English a local flavor that creates a Nigerian national identity. It must also be realized that Nigerian English vocabulary 'contains a large number of words which are either not found in Standard English or are used in ways peculiar to the Nigerian situation' (Igboanus, 2002:14).

This is so because in instances where English does not have required expressions and nuances for a Nigerian experience, the desire to communicate often results in peculiar expressions that are most appropriate for the Nigerian context (Adegbiya, 2004). For example, in expressing the need for cooperation, one of the characters in *TSLBSW* says:

Whether we accompany our palm oil with yam or we accompany our yam with oil, the most important thing is to have a good meal of oil-soaked yam. We must help each other (100).

Okoro (2004:167) has rightly observed that 'Nigerian English is simply the way Nigerians speak and write it!' especially at the syntactic level by way of transfer of MT structures. This is very evident in Nigerian literature of all genres, but our attention, here, has been on recent Nigerian novels.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

Variations are common features of any living language and such variations do not vitiate the importance or acceptability of the various forms, but these variations must be within the confines of acceptable forms that are mutually intelligible. We quote copiously from Wardhaugh (2000: 6) to clarify this point:

There is considerable variation in the speech of any one individual, but there are also definite bounds to that variation: no individual is free to do just what he or she pleases so far as language is concerned. You cannot pronounce words any way you please, inflect or not inflect words such as nouns and verbs arbitrarily, or make drastic alterations in word order in sentences as the mood suits you...The variation you are permitted has limits...these limits can be described with considerable accuracy, and...they also apparently apply to groups of speakers, not just to individuals. Moreover, individuals have knowledge of the various limits (or norms), and that knowledge is both very precise and at the same time almost entirely unconscious.

Nigerian writers who use the English language for literary purpose take cognizance of the facts above. Their variety of English is a pragmatic response to their peculiar situations and environment, without breaking basic rules of syntax and, at the same time, making purists realize that a living language such as English cannot be a closed system. The assessment of any regional variety of English, such as Nigerian English should, therefore, be endonormative rather than exonormative, bearing in mind local peculiarities, and particularly creative and pragmatic use of the language.

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