

VARIATION AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF REGION, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

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Abstract

This study investigates regional, ethno-linguistic, and social-class sociolinguistic variation in Nigerian English, exploring how linguistic choices serve as markers of identity and social positioning. Drawing on non-participant observation of verbal communication in informal environments – which include markets, motor parks, classrooms, and street conversations – the study utilises Labov’s variationist theory and Kachru’s nativisation model to examine phonological, syntactic, and lexical differences in speech. The analysis indicates that regional factors lead to phonological and intonational variation influenced by local languages; the ethnicity happens due to the variation from code-switching and lexical borrowings; and social-class differences are reflected in accent, vocabulary, and grammatical preferences. The findings foreground that Nigerian English is not merely a deviation from Standard English but an ordered variety shaped by history, culture, multilingualism, and social structure. The study concludes that Nigerian English is a legitimate linguistic system, with its variations reflecting and reinforcing social identities.

Keywords: Nigerian English, Variation, Ethnicity Social-Class, Identity, Nativisation

Introduction

The spread of English as a global lingua franca has drastically reshaped its forms in postcolonial societies where it is developing not only as an instrument of political administration and education, but also as a mirror of cultural identities and historical memories. Nigeria, as the most populous African nation and one of the most multilingual spaces in the world, provides perhaps the clearest example of this linguistic negotiation. Within the vast array of World Englishes, African varieties assume a central position, as they mark the tension between the colonial past and the native resilience, with the Nigerian form of English becoming a symbolic example of linguistic hybridity. Representing more than 200 million speakers in the most populous African nation, this variety is a vivid example of how English takes up and reflects the mosaic of a multi-lingual population, which creates a continuum of variations that undermine the ideals of “standard” use. According to Ralph Uzoezie “there are four hundred or so ethnic groups in Nigeria with an aboriginal language that English is also superimposed” (173). This observation underscores why Nigerian English cannot be reduced to a single homogenous form, but rather emerges as a layered sociolinguistic mosaic.

This linguistic mosaic of Nigerian English is what Femi Akindele and Wale Adegbite capture when they emphasize on ethnic dialects like Edo English, Hausa English, Igbo English, Yoruba English as natural outcomes of mother-tongue influence (145). Building on this observation, David Jowitt notes that “An obvious attractive parameter for determining varieties within (NE) Nigerian English is the ethnic one, i.e; distinguishing the various kinds of English that resulted from the interference of the mother tongue” (38). This position aligns with Bashir Ikara argument where he notes that “there is a range and variety of Nigerian English, each with cultural experience of specific users and a linguistic impact of their native languages” (22). Taken together, these perspectives establish Nigerian English as not a static import but a sociolinguistic space where region, ethnicity and social class meet creating semi-fluid, context-bound forms that demand strict empirical examination.

Going back to its historical roots, the entrenchment of English in Nigeria has an uneven history that dates back to the missionary incursions of the 19th century to the setting up of the formal colonial apparatus of indirect rule, which spread English unevenly across the federation. This led to regional disparities, with the southern region being exposed to English not only by trade, but also by the missionaries and thereby engendering an imbalance in proficiency level that endures today as markers of regional allegiance. As Eziaku, Ndubuaku, Eneremadu explain “monitoring the implantation, permeation, dispersion of the English language in Nigeria one can claim that it was neither simultaneous and uninformed” (593). In other words, the colonial implantation of English was so uneven and fragmented that it left behind a legacy that still echoes in contemporary Nigerian English where proficiency levels mirror these historical disparities. Jowitt extends this to proficiency gradients by linking variation to educational and social factors, noting that “The type of English spoken and written by Nigerians manifestly varies according to the level of general education attained and also because there is an obvious rough correlation between the level of proficiency in English (38). While Jowitt observes variation tied to education and social background, Alan Cruttenden reframes these differences as legitimate regional forms rather than deviations from a standard norm, stating that “educated Nigerian varieties of English only diverge at key points” (283). Taken together, these shows that Nigerian English should not be seen as inferior, rather it should be viewed as something that is shaped by historical legacies.

The core of sociolinguistic inquiry into Nigerian English lies in its phonological and morpho-syntactic flexibility where features consonant cluster, vowel mergers, and prepositional redundancy variables function as markers of identity. These characteristics are the outcome of substrate influences from over 500 indigenous languages. The result is a continuum: at one end, acrolectal forms approximating Received Pronunciation; at the other, deeply localized fusions. Brownson Ekpe notes that “The variants are caused by social variables such as class, level of education, discipline/career and style” (47). Building on this, Ekpe further emphasizes phonemic markers arguing that “The presentation shows that the /θ/ variable is a good class differentiation as it has established different social classes” (48). This view corroborates Stephen Olajide and Olamdimeji Olaniyi’s observation that “educated Nigerians approximate RP phonemes as evidence of education, exposure, and linguistic training” (281). This suggests that the phonology of Nigerian English is shaped simultaneously by ethnicity, education and class.

Babarinde and Ahamefula (1433) highlight on perceptual cues citing Herbert Igboanusi who contends that: “As a matter of fact, some Nigerians tend to say that they can understand what ethnic origin a Nigerian is by the peculiarities of his/her speech” (493). This shows how speech is often perceived as an ethnic marker with accent functioning as a kind of social badge. These patterns place Nigerian English as a fertile ground to study how linguistic choices are encoded in social meanings especially in cases where they are stratified by region, ethnicity, and class. Altogether, this suggests that accent in Nigerian English is more than a phonetic feature; it is a socially loaded signal reflecting identity, group belonging, and social boundaries.

Regional, ethnic, and social variations influence Nigerian English, and prosodic rhythms, phonology, and lexical borrowings are the characteristics of unique accents in the country. More specifically, the prosodic timelines differ regionally: the cadences are syllable-timed in Northern speakers, who are influenced by Chadic languages and stressed-timed in southern speakers, who are influenced by Niger-Congo languages, thereby forming clear and audible regional differences. These differences are strengthened by ethnic identities as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba speakers bring substrate phonologically into the English system, where they create familiar stereotypes, including Igbo devoicing of final consonants and Yoruba vowel centralization. Such features highlight how ethnicity becomes encoded into speech, producing recognizable patterns that are socially interpreted. As demonstrated by such scholars as Olajide and Olaniyi (2013), Ekpe (2012), Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020), these phonological and lexical inflexions are used as ethnic markers, reinforcing in-group unity and promoting prejudice as well. Meanwhile, the lexical innovations, i.e. semantic extensions, back-formations, and the grammar induced by L1, prove to be creative and acculturating. They are socially stratified, with upper classes using prestige-seeking RP-like forms and working classes adopting more

nativised innovations, reinforcing educational and occupational inequalities in line with Labovian patterns of variation, where linguistic forms correlate with social hierarchy.

Even with solid scholarship, gaps still exist in the analysis of interactions among regional, ethnic, and class-based variables, particularly when they are subjected to the pressures of migration and urbanisation. Most existing research separates these variables instead of tracing how they intersect in lived experiences. This gap is not merely academic but has real consequences in education, where accents can become markers of exclusion; in employment, where linguistic prejudice can limit social mobility; and in politics, where speech patterns can reinforce marginalisation. There is an urgent need to re-map these variations not as deficiencies but as loci of cultural identity and solidarity. Therefore, this paper positions Nigerian English not as a deficient variety of Standard English but as a dynamic sociolinguistic system where region, ethnicity, and social class converge. The study aims to establish that Nigerian English functions as both a site of cultural identity and a stage for social inequality, while also proposing language policies that can harness Nigeria's polyphonic voices as instruments of unity rather than division.

Literature Review

World Englishes and the Concept of Nativisation

The idea of World Englishes redefines English as a pluralistic entity that embraces localised forms of English that are influenced by cultural and language conditions in postcolonial environments. The three-circle model proposed by Braj Kachru emphasises the way in which the outer-circle Englishes, such as the one in Nigeria, evolve to represent the local identities under the influence of the native languages. Kachru explains that "such types may be regarded as the result of an intercourse between the English language and a range of indigenous languages that can take place as a normal linguistic characteristic amongst non-native speakers in their respective countries" (193). The dynamic model also elaborated by Edgar Schneider explains further how nativisation is a step in the development of postcolonial Englishes and how bilingual speakers construct different varieties. According to Schneider "there is a developmental path through which post-colonial varieties of English (New Englishes) are developed, progressively forming their own identity, in a sequence of stages, until they become independent varieties themselves. Schneider further notes that "there were five developmental stages. These are, foundation, exonormative stabilisation, nativisation, endonormative and differentiation" (54). In response to the trend of defining such adaptations as errors, Ayo Bamgbose argues that "If innovations are seen as errors, a non-native variety can never receive any recognition" (2).

Nativisation is a process through which phonological, syntactic and lexical changes take place in a systematic manner due to language contact, especially in multilingual contexts such as Nigeria. Peter Lowenberg notes that "such varieties are defined by the term of nativisation" (71). Similarly, Rajagopalan Pandharipande expounds on this localization by claiming that the:

English language is adapted to new uses and the process of nativisation in new uses and therefore nativisation can be said to take place in the change of characteristics or linguistic features of some of the foreign words when used in the dominant language and hence the localization of English words (80).

These perspectives highlight that the process of making English local to local communicative and cultural requirements does not involve random borrowing but a structured adaptation that allows English to serve local communicative needs. Nativisation has implications that ignite discussions concerning norms, identity and linguistic legitimacy Bamgbose emphasises that "If innovations are seen as errors, a non-native variety can never receive any recognition" (3). In the same vein, Andy Kirkpatrick and David Deterding view variation in language as a natural process. They observed that "Linguistic variation is a natural process and it is inevitable" (374).

Regional Variations in Nigerian English

In Nigeria, the ethnic diversity has a significant impact on the varieties of English, with more than 500 native languages affecting the pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary, forming various ethnic versions of English. Jowitt finds ethnicity as the main distinction factor when he says that “An obvious attractive parameter for determining varieties within (NE) Nigerian English is the ethnic one, i.e.; distinguishing the various kinds of English that resulted from the interference of the mother tongue (Jowitt 38). According to Eziaku, Ndubuaku and Eneremadu, English in Nigeria is perpetually undergoing nativisation, domestication, national and national-level acculturation, as well as in ethno-linguistic context of the language (594). Hugo Igboanusì observes that accent is a signifier of ethnicity: “In fact, some Nigerians often claim that they can identify the ethnic origin of a Nigerian based on the peculiarities of his/her speech. While this assertion may not be true in most cases, it is an open recognition of the existence of differences in the English language pronunciation patterns of Nigerians” (490). Such ethnic markers as Igbo devoicing or Yoruba vowel centralization are likely to promote group identity and pose a threat of perpetuating stereotypes in social relations.

Regional differences are caused by colonial factors where southern parts of the country are more exposed through missionaries and trade. Eziaku, Ndubuaku, and Eneremadu contend that “Following the implantation, permeation, dispersion of the English language in Nigeria one can say that it was not simultaneous and uninformed” (593). According to Jowitt, regional competence is dependent on education: the Nigerian spoken and written English is evidently different depending on the level of general education and also due to the noticeable crude correlation between the levels of English proficiency (38). Alan Cruttenden justifies those differences noting that “Such differences only diverge at the crucial points in educated Nigerian varieties of English” (283). While Jowitt and Cruttenden associate variation with access to education, Eziaku et al. bring into focus the significance of disparities in the past, which perpetuate north-south linguistic deviations, aggravated by contemporary migration and urbanisation that apparently soften regional demarcations.

Social Stratification and Class-Based Variation

Social class is yet another factor influencing Nigerian English. As higher education and status is associated with more prestige forms which are more like the Received Pronunciation. The variations theory proposed by William Labov applies because the speakers of the middle class are more conscious of the linguistic norms. Ekpe observes that this confirms the arguments by Labov that middle-class speakers are more aware of the social significance of linguistic variables (48). David Jowitt associates skill with education: “the kind of English spoken and written by the Nigerians, clearly differs depending on the grade of general education acquired (38). Such stratification reinforces inequalities with elite forms indicating social mobility and non-native versions carried by stigma, which places social mobility as a gatekeeper of language.

Phonological markers such as the /θ/ sound are also class differentiators and prestige forms are associated to higher status. Ekpe affirms that “The presentation shows that the /θ/ variable is a good class differentiation as it has established different social classes. These classes are reflected in their speech behaviour as in each style, the scores rise consistently from UC to LC” (48). R.A. Hudson emphasises linguistic signalling: According to Hudson “there are linguistic forms in every society that reflect the social characteristics of both the speaker and the addressee and the type of relationship existing between the two parties” (121). While Hudson offers a universal prism, Ekpe demonstrates how class cuts across ethnicity in Nigeria, increasing the marginalisation at work and in school.

Research Methodology

The study data was collected using non-participant observation. Only naturally occurring everyday conversations are purposively collected to capture the linguistic practises of Nigerian English among regions, ethnic groups, and classes. The data were retrieved through non-formal interactions in the social areas like markets, motor parks, work places and community functions where language is employed in

a spontaneous manner and in an unbiased environment. These contexts give natural-language speech patterns that represent the social and cultural forces of the Nigerian English language in the natural setting. They are chosen as they demonstrate how region, ethnicity, and social class are inscribed in everyday communication, where one can examine Nigerian English as it is being spoken in daily life. The analysis employs a descriptive and comparative method based on sociolinguistic variation theory.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis employs a descriptive method, first presenting the patterns in the data table and then grouping linguistic characteristics by ethnicity (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba) and by class (upper, middle, working). These patterns are subsequently compared using a comparative lens, which points out the divergences and convergences to show how variations serve as indicators of substrate influence, nativisation, and social stratification.

Ethnicity	Class	Everyday Situation (Observation)	Representative Extract	Key Ethnic / Class Marker(s)	Explanation
Igbo	Upper	At a bank in Awka, well-dressed businessman	“Good afternoon. Could you kindly process this transfer immediately?”	Polite formula “Could you kindly...”, avoidance of local lexicon	Upper class Igbo professionals often use formal English in public service settings, suppressing ethnic markers.
Igbo	Middle	Campus student in Nsukka, casual talk	“Abeg, make we check that thing for library, e fit help us.”	“Make we” (let’s), “fit” (might)	Typical educated Igbo youth speech: Pidgin + English blend.
Igbo	Working	Onitsha market woman to buyer	“Madam, buy okpa, na fresh one I carry come this morning.”	Use of “okpa” (Igbo food), heavy code-mix with Nigerian Pidgin	Working class + ethnic food item shows Igbo identity strongly.
Yoruba	Upper	Corporate office in Lagos	“I think we need to strategize on quarterly targets.”	Pure business English, no Yoruba particles	Upper class Yoruba in corporate world avoids local markers, aligns with global register.
Yoruba	Middle	Bus stop in Ibadan, educated commuter	“Driver, I go drop for Secretariat side, abeg.”	“I go drop” (future marker), informal register	Middle-class Yoruba mixes Pidgin with English when addressing service providers.
Yoruba	Working	Balogun market vendor	“Customer, this cloth fine well-well, abi you no see?”	Pragmatic particle “abi”, reduplication “well-well”	Yoruba working class strongly uses pragmatic particles for emphasis.
Hausa	Upper	Abuja lawyer at conference	“The constitution clearly provides for freedom of expression.”	Legal/formal vocabulary	Elite Hausa professionals use Standard Nigerian English, with little

Ethnicity	Class	Everyday Situation (Observation)	Representative Extract	Key Ethnic / Class Marker(s)	Explanation
					substrate interference.
Hausa	Middle	University student in Kano	“We go start exam tomorrow, wallahi I never read finish.”	“Wallahi” (Arabic loan), “never read finish” (Pidgin syntax)	Hausa middle class: English mixed with Hausa/Arabic expressions.
Hausa	Working	Kano market seller	“Oga, this tomato cheap-cheap, you fit buy am now-now.”	Reduplication (<i>cheap-cheap, now-now</i>), “fit buy”	Hausa working class speech: strong Pidgin and reduplication.

Descriptively, Igbo-influenced Nigerian English has specific markers associated with ethnicity and class and it is usually presented in code-mixing and syntactic transfer of Igbo substrates. In upper class contexts, as with a bank in Awka, businesspersons use polite, standard expressions such as “Good afternoon. Will you please transfer this at once?” stifling ethnic characteristics to suit the standards of prestige? This aligns with the sociolinguistic variation theory emphasis on class-based register shifts with Labov stating in his foundational work on social stratification that the social stratification of (r) in New York City department stores reveals that higher social classes show more use of prestige variants in formal styles. In this case, this avoidance of local lexicon is an indicator of upper-class assimilation to acrolectal English, where the foregrounding identity as educated elites, but perpetuating inequality, through marginalising native speakers. Middle-class Igbo speech such as Nsukka campus talk “Abeg, make we check that thing for library, e fit help us” includes some Pidgin features such as “make we”, a syntactic calque of Igbo collective pronouns, and “fit”, a semantic extension of possibility and represents hybridity. It promotes the idea of nativisation of Bamgbose who state that “In the non-native varieties, the interplay of local languages and English result in the creation of legitimate forms instead of errors” (137). Strong substrate influences can be seen in working-class Igbo usage, where code-mixing with ethnic vocabulary are widely used (e.g. “okpa” as an Igbo food term), thus highlighting substrate influences. Igboanusi writes that “[ε] and [e], [l] and [r] alternation in Igbo English has phonological underpinnings that are never found in languages of origin” (3). These illustrations now Igbo English is used as a cultural identity signifier, whereby the grades of classes dictate the level of nativisation, where upper classes are inclined towards standardisation as a means of mobility whereas lower classes adopt the hybrid forms as a means of in-group solidarity.

The Yoruba-influenced variation also demonstrates ethnic undertones adjusted to the classes in a descriptive manner with pragmatic particles and reduplication being characteristic features. Yoruba English is also used in the office of the upper-class in Lagos but without any Yoruba touch to sound like pure business English to create an impression of global competence. This prestige orientation represents an echo of the Labov theory of class consciousness where he observes that “members of the middle class are more conscious about the social significance of linguistic variables” (48). The examples of Pidgin syntactic such as at an Ibadan bus stop (“Driver, I go drop for Secretariat side, abeg”) are a mixture of informal appeals and Pidgin syntax (“I go drop” as a future marker). According to Jowitt, this is an ethnic parameter: “An evident attractive parameter in identifying varieties in (NE) Nigerian English is the ethnic one, i.e.; the differentiation between types of English that came as a result of the mother tongue interference (38). Yoruba slang words practised by the working-class Balogun market (“Customer, this cloth fine well-well, abi you no see?”), reduplication (“well-well” to stress) and pragmatic particles “abi” to tag questions) can be traced to Yoruba discourse strategies. Bamgbose reiterates that “H - deletion and h - insertion are shibboleths of Nigerian English, notably the English spoken by the Yoruba English speakers in Nigeria, which is one of the major ethno-linguistics groups in Nigeria (iii). In a descriptive sense the Yoruba English therefore represents cultural strength via

ethnic markings, however, classes are oppression at upper levels, promoting inequality with the nativised versions stigmatised in the official spaces.

The Hausa variant, as it were, include Arabic loans, reduplication and are subject to the influence of class by formality. Hausa of the upper-class, as in an Abuja lawyer (“The constitution clearly gives freedom of expression”) is legalistic, standard English, reducing the substrates to authority. This elite identification perpetuates what is dynamic about the Schneider model: “Postcolonial varieties of English (New Englishes) take some sort of basic developmental course, gradually taking on identities of their own, in successive stages until they become independent varieties of their own” (56). The ethnic-religious identity is reflected in the mixture of Pidgin syntax and Arabic loans in the middle-class Hausa of a university in Kano (“We go start exam tomorrow, wallahi I never read finish”). According to Jowitt “The Hausa English phonetic variant has [p] and [f] alternation as a local phoneme” (3). Reduplication and Pidgin is used in working-class Hausa in a marketplace in Kano (“Ogas, this tomato cheap-cheap, you fit buy am now-now”). Ekpe emphasises the differentiation of the classes where he notes that “The variants as revealed by our analysis are attributed to social variables including class, level of education, discipline/career and style” (47). These trends make Hausa English a locus of northern regional identity, and class gradients enhance nativisation at the lowest strata.

Comparatively, convergences occur within ethnic groups in terms of classes in which top classes uniformly use acrolectal forms to indicate mobility to converge at a pan-Nigerian prestige variety. An example is given of how Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa elites do not use substrates, e.g. polite formulas vs. code-mixing, which fits the stratification proposed by Labov: the language variables are related to various social groupings and meanings, and can be changed in response to social pressures (Labov, as cited in sociolinguistic variation research). Ethnic divergences are observed in the forms of ethnic specific markers: devoicing of Igbo compares to vowel centralising and alternating [l/r] of Igbo, [p/f] of Hausa and [s/sh] of Yoruba. According to Igboanusi:

In fact, some Nigerians often claim that they can identify the ethnic origin of a Nigerian based on the peculiarities of his/her speech. While this assertion may not be true in most cases, it is an open recognition of the existence of differences in the English language pronunciation patterns of Nigerians. The present investigation underlies the need for contrastive studies of both ethnic and national/regional varieties of English in order to clearly specify peculiarities and commonalities (49).

When the regions are compared, southern (Igbo/Yoruba) stressed-timed rhythms are distinct of the northern (Hausa) syllable-timed cadences, as Eziaku et al. observe “The realisations of some vowel and consonant are distorted ... the affected are either non-existent in the native language or exist in phonological situations which cannot occur in the native languages (600). Socially, working classes are brought together in Pidgin-heavy nativisation to build togetherness, and not with upper classes standardisation, and once again, Labovian patterns are reinforced: “Social class, gender, neighbourhood, and ethnicity address socioeconomic position of speakers in the community” (xi).

These variations confirm that Nigerian English is more than a cultural site of identification where ethnic identifiers are used to enhance the in-group cohesion, yet they also discriminate against the other groups. However, they stage inequality, with nativised forms excluding speakers in education and employment as Ekpe notes that “the /θ/ variable is a good differentiation in classes because it has created different classes” (48). Migration, however, is blurring boundaries. For instance, with an Igbo in Kano perhaps adopting accents and blending them. This supports Kachru nativisation view where he states that “such varieties can be viewed as the result of an intercourse of the English language with the indigenous languages” (193).

In response to the inequality, inclusive policies must promote the endonormative standards, codifying Nigerianisms in education, as Bamgbose recommends: “When innovations are regarded as mistakes, no non-native variety can ever be given any credit whatsoever (2). The media such as Nollywood might

normalise variations, promote unity, as does Schneider in the stage of differentiation: Five stages in the developmental cycle: foundation, exonormative stabilisation, nativisation, endonormative, and differentiation” (56). Multilingualism should be incorporated into policies, less prejudice created by engaging in awareness campaigns, and polyphonic voices should be turned into instruments of unity.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Nigerian English is not unitary or homogeneous but an interactive sociolinguistic system in which region, ethnicity, and social status intersect to create stratified modes of communication. Evidence from everyday life shows that phonological, syntactic, and lexical differences are not arbitrary deviations from a so-called standard but rather systematic indicators of history, identity, and social status. Regional variation rooted in colonial traditions, ethnic dynamics among more than 500 native languages, and class stratification based on access to education and prestige all contribute to making Nigerian English a complex mosaic of voices.

While the upper classes tend to suppress ethnic markers in favour of prestige varieties, the working classes embrace hybrid and nativised forms that carry cultural identity—echoing William Labov’s principle that language variation is intimately linked to social hierarchy. Such patterns demonstrate not only the creativity of Nigerian linguistic culture but also the persistence of long-standing inequalities, where certain accents are stigmatised and associated with limited mobility in education, politics, and employment.

At the same time, they highlight the resilience of Nigerian society in transforming English into a symbol of solidarity and belonging. Nigerian English, therefore, is not an inferior variety but a legitimate and evolving linguistic system that reflects the pluralism of the nation. Going forward, inclusive language policies should be developed to recognise and value Nigerianisms, ensuring that linguistic diversity becomes a tool for unity rather than division, and that the polyphonic voices of Nigerians remain a source of strength rather than an obstacle.

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