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**LANGUAGE IN TRANSITION: THE SOCIAL-MEDIA AND
EMERGING ESL VARIETY IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed giant strides in computer-mediated communications (CMCs) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), resulting in novel, revolutionary but compelling varieties or forms of language, especially English, in various social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, We chat, Instagram, Snapchat, Google⁺, etc. The social media has thus become a veritable platform for the exchange of ideas, opinions, gossip and the dissemination of information. It has also been observed that the global trend has infiltrated the online communication of Nigerian users of the English language birthing an equally new, evolutionary but increasingly influential variety of the English Language in Nigeria. This becomes the focus of this study. This study therefore through a purposive sampling collects WhatsApp chat messages of Nigerian students in South Eastern Nigeria with a view to investigate the nature of this online Nigerian English variety, the features, trends, most frequent forms and usage patterns. Through a sociolinguistic analysis of the data, the researcher discusses as well as establishes the nature and characteristic features of this emerging language variety in Nigeria.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication (CMC), Internet Relay Chat (IRC) English Language in Nigeria (NE).

Introduction

Research in the field of sociolinguistics reveals that linguistic variation and language change are incontrovertible facts of natural languages arising partly from the intrinsic flexibility of language and the variableness and creativity of its users so that it can at all times exhaustively catalog the things, events and processes in their environment and invariably cater for their communication needs, Carrol (1966). Akmaijian, Demers, Farmer & Harnish (2009, p. 275) lucidly explicate this fact when they say: 'no human language is fixed, uniform, or unvarying; all languages show internal variation.' These variations which are evident at individual and group performance levels manifest in pronunciation, diction, semantics and syntactic constructions. In other words, human language is constantly in transition. By transition is meant a change or passage from one condition, form, state, etc. to another or the process whereby this happens. Among the earliest scholars to observe this phenomenon was Charles Darwin (1859) although he compared variation in language to his theory of evolution where change results from natural selection. In his words, 'we see variability in every tongue and new words are continually cropping up' (as cited in Labov, 2001, p. 8). William Labov, however, in 1966, fine-tuned and articulated the observations on language variation in his variation theory. Variation in

language is often a product of the medium of communication and the sociolinguistic realities of the speakers. It is the burden of this study therefore to investigate language variation engineered by internet communications technology and its associated sociolinguistic realities in the Nigerian situation.

Recent scholarly research has established an online language variety which

though restricted to a relatively small percentage of the [world] population, yet through their power and popularity can become widespread and start to impact on the wider society. Already they are concerns about the gaining influence of electronic communication via chat, e-mail, mobile phones... on language generally. (Merchant 2001, p. 296)

Indeed, the influence and role of the media in language variation is uncontested. Attesting to this Bamiro (1991) (as cited in Adegbiya, 2004, p.22) describes media influence as 'indomitable, pervasive and omnipresent...either in bringing entirely new words into existence or in establishing and confirming them.' It therefore becomes not only pertinent but also urgent to identify and characterize the Nigerian variety of this online language especially since 'Nigeria wants to flow along' with the trends in globalization and internet technology (Adegbiya, 2004, p.38).

The study aims to investigate the nature of the emerging and burgeoning Internet Relay Chat (IRC) ESL variety of Nigerian English. More importantly, the study seeks to provide answers to questions associated with IRC in the Nigerian context. Such questions include:

- To what extent is the language used by Nigerians in social media chat rooms a type of the online variety of English language?
- If there is a Nigerian online language variety, what is its nature?
- What linguistic innovations characterize the variety?
- What sociolinguistic considerations inform the nature and usage patterns of the variety?
- Are there areas of convergences between the variety and other IRC language varieties?

These and related issues are what the study seeks to address.

Varieties of English

Variation in language may be the product of two or more languages in contact, variations of register, style or else variations of dialect. The so called New English, varieties of English spoken in erstwhile British colonies, are variations due to languages in contact. They are varieties spoken in Kachru's (1985) 'Outer circle', varieties resulting from British colonial, missionary, and trade interests between the 16th and 19th centuries. These varieties are the products of the spread of the English language across coasts, cultures, climes and tribes and its contact with new peoples, new socio-cultural realities and the consequent need of these new speakers to connect with each other in ways meaningful to them. Nigerian English is one instance of such domestication of the English Language.

English in Nigeria

The beginning of the use of English in Nigeria may not be pinned down with precision but historical records speculate that the earliest contact was around the 15th century when Portuguese sea merchants and pirates came to the West coast of Africa in search of a new trade route to the Orient (Awonusi, 2004).Dike (1956), Ajayi (1956) and Crowther (1962),however, date it around the 16th century. English in Nigeria therefore has roots in trade relations, missionary activities and colonial interests which have been identified as the most important factors in the entrenchment of English on Nigerian

soil (Odumuh (1987); Igboansu (2002). This contact between both standard and non-standard forms of English and the multiplicity of languages and culture in Nigeria has birthed a distinctly flavoured Nigerian variety of the English Language, Nigerian English. Bamgbose (1995) identifies the variety as the creative development of English, the evolution of distinctive Nigerian usages, attitudes, and the pragmatic use of language in addition to the transfer of phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of Nigerian Languages. Kachru (1986) identifies it as a second language variety of English which has become institutionalized in Nigeria.

Admittedly, scholars have been divided on the legitimacy of this variety of English with some seeing it as the product of imperfect learning. Some like Prator (1968), Brann (1975) have outrightly denied its existence. But however much we may wish it away, the fact remains that there exists a 'nativized', 'domesticated' and 'indigenized' variety of English in Nigeria which is a 'natural response to yawning linguistic and socio-cultural needs': a variety of English 'doing what Nigerians want it to do' (Adebija, 2004, pp. 21-22). This, especially since English occupies a prominent position in the country's chief social institutions, has the status of a second language, is the official language, the language of instruction and a lingua franca for inter-ethnic communication (Gut, 2012). Scholars have identified the features of this variety and even identified varieties within the variety (see Banjo (1975); Adekunle (1979); Adesanoye (1980); Kujore (1985); Awonusi (1987); Jowitt (1991); Banjo (1993); Igboanusi (2002). Notable among the identified varieties are Jowitt's line of varieties ranging from those heavily marked by MT [mother-tongue] transfers to those approximating SBrE [Standard British English] (as cited in Adebija, 2004, p.32), Awonusi's lectal continuum of basilect, mesolect and acrolect varieties (1987) and Adesanoye's (1980) written varieties. Awonusi (2004) has also identified a style-based variety used in SMS text messages. In fact, research preoccupation in recent times has shifted from identification and characterization to the codification and standardization of the variety. (For example, Afolanya (1977); Bamgbose (1998); Igboanusi (2002); Adebite (2010). The English Language used by Nigerians in Nigeria is an instance of English as a Second Language: the variety of English in non-native settings. Braj Kachru, an Indian born linguist, gives us a clear and deeper insight into this phenomenon in his three concentric circles. (1985, 1986)

The Social Media and WhatsApp

Man being a social animal has always sought cooperative and interdependent relationships in order to communicate and connect and stay connected with each other especially across distances. These attempts have resulted in the media of communication. From letters, the earliest method of communication, through the telegraph in 1792, the pneumatic post in 1865, the radio in 1881, the telephone in 1890 to the social media in the 20th century, super computers in 1940 and the subsequent creation of networks between computers resulting in the development of the internet, man has creatively reduced the world to a global village. Compuserve, developed in the 1960's, was the earliest form of the internet and internet relay chats, 'a form[s] of real-time internet text messaging (chat) or synchronous conferencing' (Cvijetkovic, 2010) were launched in 1988. Six degrees, created in 1997, was the foremost identifiable social media site and its users could upload a profile and make friends with each other. Since then, the social media has gained tremendous reputation with blogging sites in 1999, LinkedIn in 2005, Facebook and Twitter in 2006 and WhatsApp in 2010 (Hendricks, 2013). The social media, therefore, include all 'forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communication to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (such as videos)' (Merriam Webster, 2017).

They serve the dual purposes of social and intimate communication interaction more so as many networking sites allow cross-posting, and group and one-on-one interaction.

WhatsApp is a real-time (synchronous) online chat application with web address www.WhatsApp.com. As with other chat rooms, communication is synchronous and written conversations are combined with forms characteristic of speech and innovative explorations in interactive writing and the exchange of supplementary digital information like videos, audio files, image files, documents, user location and web addresses and sent to other users via standard cellular mobile numbers. Its initial release was in January 2010 and its original author(s) WhatsApp Inc. It was however acquired by Facebook in 2014 and as of February 2016 has a user base of one billion making it the most popular messaging app. (Merchant, 2001; Mendel, 2016). Smart phone users register an account by downloading the application, agreeing to the terms of usage, submitting their mobile number and being given a unique password with which to log into the room.

Internet Relay Chat and Computer Mediated Communication

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) has been identified by Cvjetkovic (2010, Internet Relay Chat section, para.2) 'as a form of real-time internet text messaging (chat) or synchronous conferencing [where] users take part in [single] or multi-party interactions mediated on "channels" upheld by means of server networks. Einarsson (2004) notes its similarity to spoken English, quick replies, feedback, exclamations etc. Danet et al (1997); Merchant (2001); Liu (2011); Cvjetkovic (2010); Hårdaf Segerstad (2002); Burgoon (1992); Awonusi (2004) and Crystal (2001) have also commented on the affinity of IRC with speech.

Related to IRC is CMC. CMC which was originally meant for transfer of data between computers has not lacked scholarly attention. Walther (1992) (as cited in Lane, 1994, p.1) defines it as 'synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders' computers to receivers'. Mertz (1992), as cited in Lane (1994, p.1) gives a summary definition: 'any communication pattern mediated through a computer'. CMC, therefore, encompasses all human written communication via electronic or computer networks. Studies reveal that CMC has revolutionized the way people connect with each other especially as it is evolving a language variety showcasing the unique characteristics of the medium, has ethics of usage, 'netiquette' and 'produces much different affective and relational patterns than do other types of communication due to the reduction and types of cues available to participants' (Lane, 1994, 51). Hårdaf Segerstad (2002) identifies three independent variables that influence language use in CMC: Synchronicity, space and time constraints, Situation, context of people who may be unknown to each other, and Expression, its dialogical and interactive nature. Derek Lane, in an electronic communique after a CMC seminar at the University of Oklahoma in 1994, identified reasons for the popularity of CMC. According to him, CMC in addition to enhancing the flow of information and timely sharing of ideas, eliminates stereotypical classifications thus breaking down barriers in communication. Furthermore, CMC allows entertainment, relationship maintenance, social interaction and development of interpersonal relationship. Most significantly, CMC establishes a safe environment where, in open discussions and elaboration, participants are allowed to learn from others without shame.

Features of CMC and IRC

Linguistic scholarship has identified both CMC and IRC as featuring forms which while transcending social group, culture and nation, evince a redefinition of the traditional distinctions between speech

and writing such that communications are written equivalents of verbal person to person conversations characterized by linguistic economy, use of jargon, innovative spelling, abbreviation, punctuation and grammar (Awunusi, 2004; Einarsson, 2004; Merchant, 2001).

Furthermore, they are seen to promote the development of a language that, while not exclusive, is more suitable in text-based interactions and have become widespread because of their relative ease of access and the freedom to be creative (Lane 1994; Liu, 2011; Awunusi, 2004).

Previous Studies on Language Use in Social Media in Nigeria

Research on language variation and change in recent times has proven the existence of a language of on-line communication evolving because of globalization, wide spread and far-reaching internet technology and the consequent proliferative use of CMC in social networking sites, internet forums, discussion boards and chat rooms. Noting this evolving linguistic innovation within virtual social networks, Merchant (2001) observes its reflection of more wide reaching changes in the communication landscape. One of these wide reaching changes is the online Nigerian English variety. Corroborating this Adegbija (2004, p. 38) observes:

English is the predominant language of the internet. Nigerians want to flow along. As it does, its domesticated English will also flow along ... Nigeria's participation is carried out in Nigerian English ... for better or for worse, the domestication of English will continue...

Quite a number of scholars have investigated language use in social media in Nigeria (see Thurlow (2003); Awonusi (2004); Taiwo (2004a, 2008, 2010) ; Chilwa (2008), Ifukor (2008); Otemuyiwa (2017); Adebola (2017). Thurlow (2003) focuses on the sociolinguistics of text messaging by examining the discursive culture in the use of SMS text messages among 159 older teenagers. In a similar vein, Bastin (1999), Ofulue (2004), Awonusi (2004) and Chilwa (2008) interrogate discursive practices in discussion forums, blogs and SMS. Taiwo (2008) and Ifukor (2008) focus on social identity as well as discursive practices of Nigerian online discourse. Taiwo's data came from 'Nigerian village square' and 'Nairaland', websites created by Nigerians for discussing Nigerian issues. Awonusi (2004, 2008,) investigate SMS messages as dialect, register and discourse, and their linguistic forms and functions in Nigeria. Taiwo's (2010) 'Dynamics of language mixing in Nigerian digital communication' examines language mixing in two text-based asynchronous media, internet forums and text messages. More recently, Otemuyiwa (2017) and Adebola (2017) each investigate the WhatsApp conversations of five undergraduate students in Joseph Babalola University and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, respectively. Otemuyiwa, using a pragmatic framework investigates the role of context, emoji and smileys in communicating speaker meaning, intention and emotion especially in clarifying otherwise ambiguous sentences whereas Adebola's structuralist approach focuses on the signification of smileys and emoji in the WhatsApp conversations of his sample. The present study adopts a sociolinguistic variationist posture and an adaptation of Hårdaf Segerstad's (2002) taxonomy of linguistic characteristics of CMC and investigates the WhatsApp conversations of a WhatsApp group comprising not only undergraduate students but also graduates and professionals in various fields and establishes the nature, features, trends, most frequent forms and usage patterns of the emerging but vibrant and increasingly influential real-time variety of the English Language in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the paper adopts the socio-linguistic variation theory as popularized by William Labov with his pioneering work on the relationship between society and language wherein he investigated phonological variation based on socio-linguistic factors. This approach is in contradistinction to the categorical approach and Chomskyan linguistics which were solely concerned with grammaticality and a homogeneous standard without reference to actual users and usage although it had originally been conceived as an 'extension and refinement' of Standard theory (Jalali, 2013).

The socio-linguistic variation approach to linguistic analysis began in the 1960's with Labov and Weinreich's 'ethnographic dialectological, probabilistic approach' to the study of linguistic variation (Jalali, 2013, p. 31). It sees variation as an inherent and legitimate property of language, a social phenomenon which cannot be divorced from its social contexts and users: 'no language is tyrannically consistent' and 'we see variation in every tongue and new words are continually cropping up', (Sapir, 1921, p.147; Labov, 2001, p. 8). Moreover, variation is not haphazard but systematic and may be studied both synchronically and diachronically.

The variationist methodology requires quite a number of the variables being investigated to guarantee sufficient data for analysis. Frequency of occurrence is the criterion for determining the status of a form. However, it maintains a fine balance between the level of detail and accessibility in data collection (Jalali, 2013).

The approach is, therefore, most relevant to the study, especially because it studies language from a socially realistic perspective which recognizes actual everyday language use among a diverse range of speakers. The study, therefore, using Labov's sociolinguistic variationist approach to language and an adaptation of Hårdaf Segerstad's (2002) taxonomy of linguistic characteristics of CMC, establishes the nature, features, trends, most frequent forms and usage patterns of the emerging but vibrant and increasingly influential variety of the English Language in Nigeria. Hårdaf Segerstad (2002) identifies synchronicity, means of expression and situation as the three independent variable influences on language use and provides a taxonomy of linguistic features characteristic of CMC which include among others spelling and punctuation, lexical features and abbreviations and grammatical features.

Methodology

The data used for the analysis were collected from WhatsApp chats of a WhatsApp chat group, of which the researcher is a member, called 'Educated New Nigeria' comprising educated Nigerian students, clergy and civil servants aged 16-40. By educated Nigerians is meant Nigerians who have had at least twelve years formal and continuous exposure to the English language. The group chats averaged six to eight (6-8) per day. In all 150 chats on the themes of politics, love, and academics were randomly sampled and printed for analysis over a three month period, May-July, in 2016.

WhatsApp was chosen for the study because it was listed by Statista as the most popular messaging App with a user base of one billion as of February 2016. Mendel (2016) also observes that it occupies the first rank among the most popular alternative messaging applications. The age range of the sample population is in consonance with Merchant's (2001) observation that 'young people are in the vanguard of this process [of language] change as they fluently exploit the possibilities of digital technology' (294). More so, the researcher has observed the proliferative use of WhatsApp by the sample population to connect with each other, meet their information needs and keep pace with the

ever changing global village more easily than with other forms of electronic media and therefore considers the population the most prolific in IRC.

Analysis of Data

In order to attest to the centrality of empirical qualitative investigation of actual language situations embodied in the variationist approach to language variation wherein linguistic variation is pervasive, highly structured and reflective of regular patterns of co-occurrence of language forms and social categories, in this instance the online speech community, this study investigated language variation in 150 IRC of Educated New NigeriaWhatsAppgroup chat. Innovative usage at the morphological, lexical and syntactic levels of language variation were singled out and described and the most productive innovative usages identified through a frequency distribution of the identified and characterized forms. The study did not discriminate for gender, social class or ethnic affiliation, and only innovative usages which featured a minimum of 4 times were characterized in order to eliminate the possibility of isolated or idiosyncratic usages.

Morphological Innovative Usage

The identification of the morphological innovative usages of the population was informed by Jowitt (1991), and Fakoye&Osoba's characterization of the morphology of Nigerian English among which are clipping, idiomatic adaptations, coinages, and alphabetic abbreviations.

Table 1: Table of morphological innovative usages in IRC of educated Nigerian WhatsApp users.

S/N	SBrE Form	Innovative form	Linguistic Description	Frequency of Usage	% Frequency	Remarks
1	Good morning/ good evening	Gud am/ gudp.m	Phonetic & Analogical derivation	33	22	Productive
2.	Laughing	Lafin	Phonetic derivation	4	3	
3.	Today, too	2day/2	(Alpha)numeric derivation	14	10	
4.	Forget/for	4get/4	„	12	8	
5.	Great	Gr8	Alphanumeric derivation	13	9	
6.	Every hour of the week	24/7	Numeric derivation	13	9	
7.	Miss; oh/ok; yes; eh; Plenty	Missss; ooooo; yes yes; eh eh; Plentyyyyyy	Repetition of letters and words	25	17	Usually used for emphasis. Productive.
8.	'Till day break'; In Jesus' name; 'Got to go'; Automatic teller	TDB; IJN; GTG; ATM	Alphabetism	13	9	

	machine					
9.	What's up	Xup/wassup	Phonetic derivation/ clipping	15	10	
10.	Pictures	Pics/Pix	Abbreviation	12	8	
11.	Week/weekend	Wk/wkend	„			
12.	Ok	K	Clipping	10	7	
13.	Message	Mesg.	„	10	7	
14.	Laughing out loud	Lol	Acronym	30	20	
15.	At/ Attention	@	Digital innovation	16	11	
16.	How	Hw	Abbreviation	12	8	
17.	Far	Fa	Clipping/ MT interference	7	5	
18.	Me	Mauh	MT phonetic interference	4	3	
19.	Me	Mauh	coinage	4	3	
20.	'The wheels of God grind slowly but surely'	There is God o	Idiomatic adaptation	9	6	
21.	Evening	Evenin	Clipping	10	7	

Lexical Innovative Usage

Daramola (2004), Igboanusi (2002) and Bamiro's (1994) identification of the lexical characteristics of Nigerian English provided the basis for the analysis. These include: spelling, loanwords, coinages, acronyms, clipping, among others.

Table 2: Table of Lexical Innovative Usage in IRC of educated Nigerian WhatsApp Users

S/N	SBrE Form	Innovative form	Linguistic Description	Frequency of Usage	% Frequency	Remarks
1	Thanks	Tnk, tnx, tanks	MT phonetic transfer/ Phonetic spelling	13	8.6	
2.	This	Dis, ds, diz	MT phonetic transfer/ Phonetic spelling	88	58	Highly productive
3.	Your	Ur	Phonetic spelling	18	12	
4.	The	d/de	MT phonetic transfer	35	23	Productive
5.	Better	Beta	MT phonetic transfer	20	13	

6.	Are	Ar/r	Phonetic spelling	27	18	Productive
7.	What	Wetin	Loan word from pidgin	35	13	Productive
8.	Please	Pls/plz	Phonetic spelling	20	13	
9.	That	Dat/dt	MT phonetic transfer	11	7	
10.	You	U	Phonetic spelling	95	63	Highly productive
11.	People	Ppl	Phonetic spelling	6	4	
12.	When	Wen/whn	Phonetic spelling	9	6	
13.	Because	Cos/bcos	Abbreviation/ Phonetic spelling	4	3	
14.	See	C	Phonetic spelling	4	3	
15.	Is	Iz/z	Phonetic spelling	5	3.3	
16.	Just	Jst	Phonetic spelling	7	4.5	
17.	Girl	Gal/gel	MT phonetic transfer	4	3	
18.	Been	Bin	MT phonetic transfer	5	3.3	
19.	Recession	Recession	Semantic extension	4	3	
20.	Resting/relaxing	Chilling	Semantic extension	5	3.3	
21.	Gap fillers: em, ah, um, hm	Emm, Ahhh, hmm,	Features of spoken language	7	4.5	
22.	Ellipsis (...)	Ellipsis (...)	Features of spoken language	52	35	Productive
23.	Use of emoticon: smiley,		IRC feature	10	6	
24.	Time	Tym	Phonetic spelling	7	4.5	
25.	Expletives/Discourse particles	Haba, Gbim, Chai, Tufiakwa, Shebi.	Loan words	47	31.3	Productive
26.	Beautiful/Pretty(girl)	Asanwa	Loan word	4	3	

Syntactic Innovations

By syntactic innovations is meant the 'rather unusual English sentence patterns and usage' (Dadzie, 2004, p.231) of the sample population. These include: omission/inclusion of articles, reduced sentences, ordering, reduplication of modifiers, variant punctuation, among others.

Table 3: Table of Syntactic Innovative Usage in IRC of educated Nigerian WhatsApp Users

S/N	SBrE Form	Innovative form	Linguistic Description	Frequency of Usage	% Frequency	Remarks
1	I am...	Am...	Reduced Sentence	45	30	Pro-ductive
2.	We have not started...	V nt started	„	25	17	„
3.	Good morning/evening	Gud am/pm	„	40	27	„
4.	Very (adjective/adverb)	Very very (adjective/adverb)	Reduplication of modifiers	24	16	
5..	Appropriate use of exclamation(!) and question(?) marks	Reduplication of punctuation signs:???; !!!	Variant punctuation	41	27.3	Pro-ductive
6.	Appropriate use of capital letters, period, spacing, exclamation and question marks	Non capitalization of proper nouns & I: friday, easter, frank, i; Lack of spacing between words:...among.it, soon.pls;	Variant punctuation	60	40	Very Pro-ductive
7.	Your (noun)...	Dis ur message...	Ordering	10	7	
8.	Here in this (noun)...	4 dis our school	Ordering	10	7	
9.	Please send a mail	Inbox me.	Re-classification	5	3	
10.	A/an/the (noun)	I went to/was in church/market/school/ office: Get/bring/buy umbrella, mop	Omission of articles	15	10	
11.	Formal style: No contractions,	Contractions, tag controlled deletion, abbreviations. E.g	Informal style	83	55.3	Very pro-ductive

	abbreviations and subject and auxiliary deletion in writing.	C u; running for the post?; pls, e.g, wk, r/ship etc.				
12.	Written medium	Use of multimedia: Visual (pictures, videos), audio(music and other sound recordings) and text.	Multimedia	15	10	Fairly new
13.	Features of spoken communication	Informal style: Ellipsis (...), expletives (haba, tufiakwa), Gap fillers: emm..., hmm, eee...	Discourse particles	54	36	Very Pro-ductive
14.	Pidgin and/or MT influenced structures	Ow body? All what am saying...;For this buhari regime?' who came first today in this room?	Language contact	37	25	Pro-ductive
15.	Code mixing/switching	Meaning gini? ; Abegi leave dat matter joor, etc	Text multilingualism	49	33	Pro-ductive

Discussion of Data

The data in tables 1, 2, and 3 reveal a revolutionary but nonetheless thriving and compelling online variety of Nigerian English which, though similar in many respects to other online language varieties, derives basically from the sociolinguistic realities of the Nigerian nation. These sociolinguistic realities include among others: multilingualism with multiple cultures, educational attainment, linguistic exposure, language attitudes (attitude to spelling conventions, irregularities in language, traditional distinctions between speech and writing, etc.), social group relationships, demands of globalization and zero tolerance for resource-consuming ventures (money, time, space, etc.). The variety is thus characterized by morphological, lexical and syntactic explorations in language use as well as combinations of features of face to face conversational interactions, interactive writing and digital information. The result is a variety in which the distinctions hitherto made between speech and writing are redefined.

Admittedly, there is some over-lapping in the categorization of the innovative forms but this is because of the sometimes blurred distinction between language categories. The commonest morphological innovations include: phonetic and/or analogical derivations (Table 1: 1 & 2), repetition

of letters (Table 1: 8 & 14), acronyms (Table 1: 4 & 9), alphanumeric derivations (Table 1:3, 4 & 5), and abbreviations (Table 1: 10 & 16).

The prolific lexical innovations include MT phonetic transfer/phonetic spelling (Table 2: 1-5, 8-18), ellipsis (Table 2: 22 & 24) and loan words from pidgin and the local languages (Table 2: 25 & 26).

Innovative usages at the syntactic level mostly featured reduced sentences (Table 3:1-3), variant punctuation (Table 3: 5& 6), informal style, oral communication medium strategies (Table 3: 11 & 13), and pidgin and MT influenced structures (Table 3:14) and text multilingualism (Table 3: 15).The excerpts below exemplify these:

Conversation 1 'The Power of Praise' 8/6/2016

A: **Dis** morning **wen** I was reading **d** bible I came across a passage in 2chr20:21-22(Quote)

A:In **d** place of **praiz batls ar 1**, enemies **ar defeatd**, **reqsts ar grantd**, Curses **ar** broken, **captvs ar s8** free as in **d** case of Paul nd Silas wen dr were in prison.(Phonetic realization, MT influenced structure, abbreviation, alphanumeric)

A: As **u** ponder on **dis nd learn 2 praiz**, may His **favourd blezn loc8 u** in d mighty name of Jesus. **Gud am nd av a blezd day ahead**. Shalom!!!

B: **Gud am frnds.Tanx Mr A n hapi bday**. (Analogy, abbreviation)

C: **Dat's true ooo. Hapi born day Mr A. How una nite n dawn bn dey?** (Pidgin/ MT influenced structure, repetition of letters, analogy)

D:**Gud mornng gud pple. Happi bday oga ndi Enugu**.(Abbreviation,Nigerian Pidgin/ MT influenced structure, Text multilingualism)

B: Meaning **gini @missC** (Text multilingualism, digital information)

A: **tnx al. Tot I shld** share **dis wt u dis** morning (Abbreviation and variant punctuation, phonetic realization)

E: I **hop item 7 dey?** (Nigerian pidgin influenced structure, coinage)

B: **4 ds buhari regime? Nooooo** (Nigerian pidgin influenced structure, variant punctuation repetition of letters)

C: **hahaha....** Lafin in Ikwo (features of oral communication)

A: **mega dddddd.... dr** is **God ooo**(Nigerian pidgin influenced structure, repetition of letters)

Conversation 2 12/5/2016

A: Hi **evry1** (Alphanumeric combination)

B: So **pple r alredi** here. A **gud am**(Abbreviation, analogy and phonetic realization)

A: **Hw** was **ur 9nt?** (Abbreviationand phonetic realization)

B:**Fyn. Gud** morning **al**. (Abbreviation, analogy and phonetic realization)

C: **Am 2 al ofu** (Analogy, number-letter homophone, abbreviation and phonetic realization)

B: God **hs blzd** my family **dis** morning **nd + anoda pesn. Am so hapi**. (Phonetic realization, analogy, ordering)

D: Congratulations. I receive **ds ur** testimony. (Phonetic realization, ordering)

B: **Tanks**. God wil do **4 u wat u** can't do **4 yrslf or on ur** own. (Abbreviation and number-letter Homophone)

E: To God **b d** glory (Phonetic realization)

B: **Amenoooooooo** (repetition of letters)

F: Wow. Biscuit **nd** malt so **plentyyyyy....** (Repetition of letters and ellipsis)

B: **Yesoooh** (Repetition of letters)

F: **Am** waiting...(Ordering and ellipsis)

The words in bold are instances of innovative usages in the WhatsApp chats of the sample population.

The appreciably high incidence of phonetic spelling or letter-number homophone reveals a desire to simplify written language and 'regularize' the often inconsistent and seemingly illogical and confusing spelling of English words. Furthermore, the use of abbreviations, acronyms, clipping, and multi-media, the informal style and oral communication strategies reveal a growing need to make writing very interactive.

The data and excerpts also reveal that there abound areas of convergences between the ESL Nigerian online variety and other online language varieties. Guy Merchant's (2001) investigation of language use in internet chat rooms revealed spelling innovations, abbreviations, digital information, jargon and combinations of interactive writing with features of face-to-face talk. Cvjetkovic's (2010) study of language variation on internet chat wherein he examined what characterizes and distinguishes the written English of online chatrooms from conventional written English observed same features and in addition noted the strong affinity to spoken language. Eninarsson (2004) and Crystal (2001) made similar observations while HårdafSegerstad (2002) adds [variant] punctuation, repetition of words and letters, and logo types. These shared features among online language varieties reiterate the variationist posture that while variation is inherent in linguistic structure, linguistic variation is pervasive, highly structured and reveals regular patterns between language forms and social categories.

The areas of convergences notwithstanding, the Nigerian ESL online variety is distinctly Nigerian especially because it is informed by uniquely Nigerian sociolinguistic experiences. Such uniquely Nigerian innovations include: reduced sentences, ordering, Nigerian pidgin/MT influenced structures, idiomatic adaptations, loan words, expletives, repetition of letters and words for emphasis, text multilingualism and apparent over-dependence on ellipsis to signal hesitation, inconclusiveness, a pause or to create suspense as is evident in the excerpts.

Conclusion

The study investigated the new, evolutionary but increasingly influential variety of the English language used by Nigerians in social media chatrooms. To this end therefore, it analyzed the WhatsApp chats of a WhatsApp chat group, 'Educated New Nigeria', using the sociolinguistic variationist framework. The analysis reveals that there is a written online ESL variety of Nigerian English which though similar in many respects to other online language varieties is basically informed by the sociolinguistic realities of the Nigerian nation. This variety is characterized for the most part by spelling innovations reflected in phonetic spellings, conventional and unconventional abbreviations and MT phonetic transfers; text multilingualism, features of spoken discourse, reduced sentences and the informal style. The study also reveals that the use of emoticons and other media are still not very common practice. Though the variety shares a number of these features with other online/IRC language varieties especially because of the synchronicity of the media and the space, time and economic constraints associated with it (See HårdafSegerstad, (2002); Liu, (2011); Lane,

(1994); Cvjetkovic, (2010); Awonusi, (2004), the Nigerian English variety is replete with innovations in language use that reflects uniquely Nigerian sociolinguistic realities and the realities of online real time communication. The shared features therefore give credence to Awonusi's (2004) observation that Nigeria is not isolated from the advancing frontiers of globalization. The study, however, did not discriminate for gender, social class or ethnic affiliations. We therefore recommend that further research should focus on whether these have any significant influence on the nature, forms, features and usage patterns of the variety.

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