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**The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood
by Taiwo O.Ehineni**

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Abstract

It has been noted that since the English language was introduced into Nigeria, contact with the many indigenous languages has precipitated variation in the norms and forms of English spoken within the country (Bamgbose 1995; Adegbija 2004). Additionally, the different socio-cultural contexts of use have informed the evolution of new forms of English in the country. While the subject of Nigerian English has been largely examined in the literature, little attention has been given to its use in the Nollywood linguistic context. It is suggested that an analysis of the use of Nigerian English, particularly in the Nollywood domain, can provide further insights into the linguistic peculiarities of Nigerian English in other contexts. This study aims, first, to investigate/describe the Englishes used in Nigerian Nollywood context. Second, to determine to what extent it is similar to other forms of Nigerian English and what are the implications for Nigerian English scholarship. The paper also reveals how the multilingual setting in Nigeria overwhelmingly influences the use of English in Nollywood.

Key words: Nigerian English, sociolinguistics, Nollywood. Linguistic variation



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

Nigerian English: views and perspectives

Language use often adapts to contextual and situational constraints as its users vary across different geographical, social, cultural and institutional spaces. English is such a typical language that, as a result of vast geographical distribution, has often assumed the idiosyncracies of different environments that use it informing the notion of variety. Accordingly, Nigerian English is a reflection of the use of English in the Nigerian linguistic context. The notion of ‘Nigerian English’ is an attempt to describe a variety of English adapting to the dictates of its users and their environment rather than international standards.

Nigerian English has been defined as the variety of English used in the Nigerian sociolinguistic situation (Adegbija 2004; Bamgbose 1995). This conceptualization of Nigerian English orients to the notion of ‘indiginization’ or ‘nativization’ of English in non-native varieties (Kachru 1986), which has been used to describe the new varieties of English also known as ‘New Englishes’ burgeoning all over the world. Odumuh (1993, 1987) recognized NE as one of the new Englishes and had this to say: “Our position is that there exists at the moment a single super ordinate variety of Standard English in Nigeria which can be regarded as ‘Nigerian English.’” Reiterating what the concept of Nigerian English, Ajani (2007) indicates one of the foremost definitions of Nigerian English as ‘the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians’ (Walsh, 1967). It is therefore the English used and understood by Nigerians. This is true to a large extent as it has been found that in most countries where English is functional, local colors have led to the development of kinds of English different from the native varieties.

However, there are divergencies in agreement on the existence of a true Nigerian English variety among scholars. Some view it as “bad English” (Vincent 1974). Similarly, it has been argued that what is considered Nigerian English is in reality “errors of usage” (Salami 1968). These scholars regard the variety as deviations from the ‘norm’ and as a result, a derogatory or bastardized version of the Standard British English usage. In a more recent undertaking, Ajani



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

(2007), examines the existence or non-existence of a distinct variety of English known as “Nigerian English”. He scrutinizes the scholarly contentions on the subject and to what extent are divergent opinions true.

The underlying questions of Ajani (2007)’s enquiry is if there is indeed such a variety of English as claimed by scholars, what are its main identifying characteristics? Put differently, does a Yoruba speaker of Nigerian English use English exactly the same way as a Igbo, or Hausa speaker? If not? What then constitutes the Nigerian English? Notably, this has continued to evoke arguments from scholars with no definite consensus (Ajani 2007). Consequently, this has crystalized to the subdivision of Nigerian English into regional Englishes as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo Englishes contending that it is these dialect types that contribute to feed and enrich the super-ordinate Nigerian English (Ajani 2007; Odumuh 1987). In a way, this view seems to recognize or reinforce the place of some local realities of Nigerian English but does not attempt to inform on universal or generic features of this variety.

Despite the polemics on the notion of Nigerian English, distinguishing features of the variety can be and have been extensively identified. Several other linguists (Dadzie 2004; Awonusi 2004; Bamgbose 1995; Bamiro 2009, 1994; Adetugbo 1979; Kujore 1985; Adegbija 2004, 1989; Goke-Pariola 1993) have not only endorsed the existence this variety of English but have also lucidly highlighted its identifying features in various levels of linguistic analysis. Adegbija (1989), Bamiro (2009; 1994), Alabi (2000) have described Nigerian English in terms of its lexico-semantic features. Okunrinmeta (2013, 2010), Jowitt (1991) and Adesanoye (1973) have focused on aspects of morphology and syntax in their description of Nigerian English. They explore some peculiar structural formations in this variety. Awonusi (2004), Adetugbo (2004), Eka (1985) have focused on phonology while some others have focused on pragmatic aspects of Nigerian English (Bamgbose 1995; Banjo 1996).

Most of these studies have been concerned with domains such as Nigeria media, newspapers, speeches, lectures and students academic writings. Bamiro (2009, 2006) especially



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood **by Taiwo O.Ehineni**

has often focused on the domain of Nigerian literature to uncover some forms of linguistic variation. He reveals how Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka ‘localize’ English in their works to reach the vast Nigerian audience. This study, however, examines the Nollywood context essentially to inform about Nigerian English and to draw certain the implications.

The Nollywood context is an interesting one since it serves the entire Nigerian populace of over 250 ethnic groups and more than 400 languages. Apparently, the deployment of language in this domain is overwhelmingly influenced by the necessity to effectively communicate messages to the Nigerian audience which in itself is very diverse. Thus, the study attempts to explore the manifestation of Nigerian English in this domain of use and more importantly, how this usage informs about the sociolinguistic situation in the Nigerian environment.

Methodology

Three very popular award winning Nollywood films are selected for this study: *Last Flight to Abuja*, *Figurine* and *Police Woman*. The movie *Last Flight To Abuja* (2012) is a thriller based on true life events of chronicling the experiences of a set of everyday Nigerians prior and during boarding the last Flamingo scheduled to fly from Lagos to Abuja on a fateful Friday night in 2006. Mid-air difficulties forces a Nigerian commercial plane into an emergency landing with devastating consequences. *Figurine* (2009) is epitomizes the realities of love, betrayal and survival through the lives of three young people. Two friends encountered a mystical object that bestows good luck for seven years but has evil consequences in the latter years. *Police Woman* (2015) encapsulates the life and experiences of a young police woman in the Nigerian community. These films are generally involve English as main communicative medium. They however depict the multilingual situation in Nigeria as evidenced by the different linguistic backgrounds of the category of people in the films. The films are analyzed to explore and examine some peculiar features of Nigerian English usage. This is done to foreground the extent at which the different L1 in the Nigeria environment influence the use of English in this domain



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

and the implications of this manifestation. Hence, the theoretical approach engaged in this study is sociolinguistic in orientation.

Analysis of Linguistic Features

The identifiable linguistic features are categorized as follows:

a) Code-switching and Code mixing

i. English – Yorùbá

‘I don’t know why these people se funny gan’ (I don’t know why these people are so funny)

‘*Sebi* you are not angry with me?’ (Hope you are not angry with me)

‘Change *ko*, change *ni*’

‘Before *ńkó*’

‘Is it your wife who wears the *şòkòtò* in your house?’

‘Mad *kẹ̀*?’

ii. English - Igbo

‘*Biko* help my son first (please)

‘Chimamanda my daughter *agaku riakuku*’ (will die)

‘*ofo pura yamma* my only jewel is going’ (I am begging you)

iii. English - Hausa

‘Madam, *walai talai, gaskia*’

iii. English - Pidgin

‘Officer please na beg I dey beg you’

‘Na wetin dey eat you up again’



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

'No wahala'

'I feel sell you ticket but e go cost o'

'I go try Madam'

'Make you no worry'

'I wan rest, I don tired'

'I no go work for this your jagajaga office'

'Abegi, no be by force'

Nigerian Pidgin is a sociolinguistic consequence of the contact between Nigerians and European traders in the colonial period and has continued to remain a vehicle of linguistic communication in many urban centers in the country. It is also the first language for many Nigerian speakers even though it is not necessarily their mother tongue or native language especially people in the Bendel region of the country (Ofulue 2004).

It should be noted that while English has an official and second language status in Nigeria, the use of code-switching in Nollywood involving features of local languages reflects the influence of the country's linguistic diversity. Secondly, code-switching is used as a marker of ethnic/regional identity. Based on the country's large number of ethnic groups or nationalities, people project who they are and where they come from by code-switching to a local dialect. Thirdly, code-switching also becomes necessary depending on the audience. People could code-switch to a language if they meet someone from another ethnic group and they have an average level of proficiency in the language. It is also a way to 'connect' with people from other ethnic groups.

b) Translation equivalents

'You met me well' (meaning *to meet someone in good or happy condition*)

'When I eat finish' (meaning *when I am done eating*)

'I love him die' (meaning *to love someone so much*)



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

This refers to expressions where structures and meaning in the second language are fashioned after such existing structures in the native language. The above expressions have been influenced by both Yoruba and Igbo languages.

c) Semantic Extension

'I am sorry, I don't *hear* Yoruba' (I can't speak Yoruba)

'I will show you *pepper*' (to treat someone badly)

This relates to the extension of the semantic frame of a word to express new meanings. It could also mean means the transfer of the meaning of a word to another sense (Adegbija 1989: 171).

d) Redundant use of prepositions

'He requested for our assistance'

'He contemplated on what to you'

e) Coinages

'Okada' - a commercial motorcyclist

'Corper' - a member of the National Youth Service Corps program

'Pure water' - a type of water packaged in a sachet

f) Idiomatic Expressions

'to split open the crocodile's intestine' (meaning, *to reveal a secret*)

'hold your tongues in your hand' (meaning *to keep quiet*)



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

‘let us go outside and whisper together’ (meaning *to discuss privately*)

‘He met his wife at home’ (meaning *met his wife as a virgin*)

‘I thank my stars’ (meaning *to be lucky*)

‘Painting the city red’ (meaning *to be troublesome*)

Expressing an idiom from the indigenous socio-cultural conceptual frame in English often entails subverting the language to a process of adaptation to be able to meticulously convey or reflect the original sense to the audience. Thus, most Nigerian English idioms are ‘carry overs’ from the indigenous language and also this is made possible owing to the lack of equivalents in English.

It is instructive to point out that, in all the films, there is a general preponderance of English words and expressions. On the other hand, the English-Yoruba, English-Igbo, English-Hausa, English-Pidgin reveal situations where English is the main language of interaction with occasional use of words or expressions in the indigenous languages. Essentially, we see that use of English in this domain is influenced by indigenous Nigeria languages including Yorùbá, Igbo, Hausa and Pidgin.

Some Observable Sociolinguistic Variables in the films

Identity

The use of language often reflect and promote the lifestyles of the speakers. By incorporating some indigenous codes in their Englishes, the participants showcase their linguistic and ethnic affiliations.

Solidarity

It can also be deduced that linguistic choices are motivated by in-group relations and friendship ties. Most often than not, as seen in the films, people use English to communicate with their family members and friends in a way that is different from other people.



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood

by Taiwo O.Ehineni

Setting/Environment

In *Police Woman*, English was used generally in the film but predominantly in the office and during community meetings. However, English-Igbo was used more in the neighborhood while people were quarreling with each other and during a family meeting. English Pidgin was used on the street.

In *Last Flight to Abuja*, English only was used more at the office during an official meeting, at the airport during a conversation with a service desk attendant, at the bank during an interaction with a bank official. English-Yoruba was used at home between husband and wife and in the car between two friends returning from office. English-Pidgin occurred during a business transaction at the airport involving people from different ethnic backgrounds.

In *Figurine*, English only was used during a job interview at a company, at a professor's office during discussion with a graduate student and in a car between two people returning from work. English-Yoruba was used in a bar between two intimate friends, at home between siblings. English-Pidgin was used by at the NYSC orientation camps by soldiers during training and at night party among friends during camp.

Implications of the study

First, it reveals the extent at which the various L1 influence the use of English. This sociolinguistic manifestation on one hand reinforces scholarly views on Nigerian English as a continual reflection of the linguistic plurality and diversity in the Nigerian linguistic ecology (Bamgbose 1995; Adegbija 2004). It has been seen that the use of English in this context is overwhelmingly influenced by various indigenous languages in the country.

Second, this study suggests or perhaps confirms that Nollywood may play an influential role in establishing local standards of this variety based on the growing extensive use of some 'localized Englishes' in the domain as seen in this study and also with the growing relevance of the



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

industry which has an estimated annual net income of 45 million US dollars, in sub-Saharan Africa (Omoniyi 2006).

Third, with the growing spate on Nigerian English in other contexts of use, as seen in the Nollywood domain, this study expresses the need to encourage the teaching of this variety in the educational curriculum which also advances some previous positions (Okunrinmeta 2014; Adegbija 1989). However, this does not entail discarding or ignoring the Standard (British) English that is being taught in educational institutions. This is just to facilitate students' communicative competence in the Nigerian sociolinguistic context. For instance, idioms like "to split open the crocodile's intestine" is more appropriate within the Nigerian socio-cultural and pragmatic context and, thus, preferred to the British English variant "to let the cat out of the bag" because it orients to a quintessential Nigerian indigenous socio-cultural perspective. It is believed that the crocodile as a powerful carnivore is difficult to find and kill. Thus, whatever is inside the crocodile's intestine is a "top secret" oblivious to everyone. The crocodile's intestine is seen as a metaphor for secrecy.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the use of English in Nollywood is a midwife of the complex multilingual situation in Nigeria. Nigerian movies are most often than not influenced by multilingual realities of the country. The characters' choice of language has also been motivated by their awareness of the language options and abilities of their interlocutor(s) and a recognition of their own language strengths and limitations. Hence, communicative context drives linguistic choice.

Furthermore is the issue of identity and solidarity. Code switching, for instance, is a linguistic process of asserting one's identity in a society of vast ethnic nationalities – 250 ethnic groups. Also, aside reflecting the co-habitation of different linguistic groups in Nigeria, it may also promote peaceful co-existence, mutual cooperation between and among different linguistic groups in Nigeria (Adedun 2010:25).



The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood by Taiwo O.Ehineni

This study, through the analysis of the use of English in the movies, portray the sociolinguistic realities of English usage in the Nigeria. In other words, what we see in the Nollywood domain is a sociolinguistic chemistry that happens when English is used in different contexts as also extensively foregrounded in the World Englishes literature (Kachru 1986; Kachru 1985). More importantly however, the forms of Nigerian English usage discovered in this Nollywood context reflect the growing, dynamic nature of this variety in the Nigerian society.

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The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood **by Taiwo O.Ehineni**

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**The Pragmatics of Language Use in the Nigerian Nollywood
by Taiwo O.Ehineni**

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