

## **Coinages in Nigerian English: A Sociolinguistic Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Nigerian English coinages have been widely investigated in different literatures ranging from studies in Sociolinguistics, Semantics, Pragmatics, and Syntax to Metaphors and Cognitive linguistic studies. This present paper is a re-visitation of the Nigerian English lexicon, taking cue from the lexicographic efforts of Igboanusi (2002). We have sociolinguistically x-rayed some common usages among Nigerians in different socio-political cum cultural and metaphorical course contents. Gumperz's diffusionist theory was borrowed to strengthen our theoretical base. Gumperz (1968) proposes a diffusionist theory of the speech community. The theory postulates the spread of linguistic change/transfer in intersecting waves that emanate from different centres of innovation.

Word coinage, compounding and acronyms surfaced as the characteristic features of Nigerian English coinages. The first feature refers to the process of creating words to fit particular purposes while compounding on the other end is the process whereby two or more words are brought together to form a single lexical item, hyphenated or not. Acronyms are also identified as means of deriving peculiarly Nigerian nomenclatures of certain phenomena as words derive from the initials of several words. Borrowing on its part, was identified in Nigerian English as many words evolving from cultural and religious backgrounds of Nigerians. These are referred to as loan or foreign words. These features among others are recognized as very prominent in the varieties of English being spoken in Nigeria. Nigerian English lexical forms, therefore find expression in linguistic perspectives to language change, shift, transfer and dialectology.

### **Introduction**

When a word or an idiom is employed to express a meaning which it does not hitherto convey, the meaning and referent are said to have been expanded. In other words, a change in the sense of a word causes a modification in the mental content that constitutes the meaning of such lexical item. A word can be given a new meaning by an individual or by the general public. At times, a coinage receives public acceptance if it is considered the most appropriate word to capture a concept among a speech community. This is because the meaning ascribed to a word by its use in particular context will take precedence over its etymological derivation. In a nutshell, what this implies is that it is the use of the words that determines the meanings of words in a sentence (Allan 1986:77-78). This paper will analyze how word derivations and coinages in Nigeria generate meaning. The words will be discussed from the perspective of factors leading to their emergence and use. First, to be discussed in this essay is the 'Nigerianess' in English.

Nigerian English is a term used to describe the kind of English that reflects second language incompetence of the target standard forms of English. It is a phenomenon that has been described widely along the lines of differing fields of linguistic studies. Popular, among these studies have investigated English language usage in Nigeria, from the variational, phonological, grammatical or syntactico-semantic purviews. Among all these studies, lexical nativization, acculturation,

domestication, etc. have been used to describe the kind of English being spoken as a second language in Nigeria.

Lexical and semantic collocations in the Nigerian contexts are primary, in this paper. The contextual usages of lexical items in Nigeria have come through several processes. The most productive of these, in the words of Adebija (2004:23) include:

- Coinages
- Hybridization
- Analogization
- Direct translation and transliteration
- Transfer
- Affixation
- Acronymization, etc.

Coinages, our focus in this paper, have been situated variously by researchers within the sociolinguistics of Nigerian English (cf. Odumuh 1987:69-126, Adebija 2004:23) among several other references. Coinages or neologism are identified as new terms created for new experiences, especially where the speaker of the language either experiences dearth of correct standard lexical item to express himself or uses a word or an expression to satisfy the communicative purpose of his immediate environment. Such coinages are sometimes metaphorically explainable and could be a result of interference or transfer of traits from a speaker's first language to the target language.

Adebija (2004:24) refers to the sub-standard forms of English as results of 'transfer from culture, sense or meaning from the native language into English, or reinterpretation or extension of an existing meaning in English to cover new areas of experience in Nigerian English. Our purpose in this study is to provide explanations to some common Nigerian English coinages observed around us in different speech contexts. The effort here is an attempt to break off from the formalist approaches to linguistics which is common among researchers. For quite a while linguists oriented toward formal analysis, showed very little interest in transfer phenomenon and the entailments of linguistic behaviour and social communication.

### **Theoretical Background**

Words are sounds. They are graphics when written. They are also the essentials of a language through which speakers and writers express themselves. When we speak, we put our thoughts into words. Knowing a language entails having knowledge of the words or morphemes and sound sequence in that language. It entails a lexico-semantic knowledge of what they mean. This knowledge affords one to use the words appropriately in sentences and understand them when one hears them.

The totality however of words in language constitutes its lexicon. Any additional information of lexical items in a language comes about as a result of one or more of the following processes mentioned earlier above: coinage, acronym, blend, abbreviations, borrowings and compounding, among others. The introduction of a new word into a language strikingly draws the attention of the speakers. It must however be noted that just as new lexical items are added into a language, the language also loses words due to lack of use.

Word coinage, which is our focus in this paper refers to the process of creating words to fit particular purposes while acronyms are words derived from the initials of several words. Compounding on the other end is the process whereby two or more words are brought together to form a single lexical item, hyphenated or not. Borrowing on its part, refers to the process by which some linguistic items of one language or dialect are incorporated into another language. These are referred to as loan or foreign words. These features among others are very prominent in the varieties of English being spoken in Nigeria.

### **Sociolinguistic approaches to Language Change**

The literatures in sociolinguistics that appear relevant to this study on coinages in Nigerian English are historical in nature. They find expression in linguistic perspectives to language change, shift, transfer and dialectology; all insights from Gumperz (1968). Gumperz (1968) proposed a diffusionist theory of the speech community. The theory postulates the spread of linguistic change/transfer in intersecting waves that emanate from different centres of innovation with intensity proportionate to the prestige of their human carriers.

In contrast with the diffusionist principles is the geneticists. While geneticists regarded modern language distribution as the result of the segmentation of older entities into newer and smaller groups, diffusionists viewed the speech community as a dynamic field of action where phonetic change, borrowing, language mixture, and language shift all occur because of social forces. Our interest in this theory is its recognition of the result of two languages in contact. Gumperz (1982:223) states that “wherever, two or more speech communities maintain prolonged contact within a broad field of communication, there are cross-currents of diffusion. The contact between English language and the over four hundred Nigerian indigenous languages (see Bendor Samuel, et al 1994; Adegbija 2004:40-45; Gut and Milde 2002; Grimes 1996; Bamgbose 1971 among others) has necessitated lexico-semantic shifts and changes in the standard forms of English. These changes are prominently observed in forms of transfer – linguistically, culturally, metaphorically and socially.

### **Cultural Interference and Social Meaning**

The Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis is recognized in sociolinguistics because of its affirmation of the cultural content of language and his view of culture as the means by which members of the society express their thoughts and ideas to one another. They add that the anthropological view that basic differences exist in the thought process of individuals give rise to a diversity of patterns of a body of knowledge for each society. Taking a cue from a recent work as that of Cameron (1997:60), linguistic behaviours of humans are explainable in terms of the existence of social meaning. For instance, an expression such as “we need a very long leg to get a good job” requires the understanding of the Nigerian worldview and the socio-cultural background of the interlocutors before any meaning can be made out of the statement by a non-Nigerian. To a Nigerian, the statement would make meaning because of the existence of a similar experience in the Nigerian indigenous languages, where *ese* (*leg*) is required for certain privileges and influences. Thus, the transfer of such mother tongue experience into English informs the use of ‘long leg’ in the statement above. Individual culture is observable in the linguistic behaviour of a people.

Hymes (1997:12) demonstrates his preoccupation with social meaning via cultural content of language when he submits that “there is more to the relationship between sound and meaning than is dreamt of in moral linguistic theory”. He adds that “in meaning, there is social as well as referential import”. In the words of Babatunde (2006:150), Hymes (1997) affirms that in between the social and referential layers of meaning, there are other relationships which, though present in social life, are not evident in ordinary grammar. Hymes’ concern for social meanings as contained in linguistic materials is relevant in this study. He sees means of speech as inseparable from the meanings made of it by the users of the language. The imports from the discussion above is that varieties of English as a second language should rather be appreciated from the socio-cultural perspective than from the linguistic codes.

The implication of the absence of a direct relationship between language and culture and social meaning is felt more in the educational system of the society. The assertion that ‘when the language employed in the education of a people does not reflect their culture, the recipients of such an education are bound to be limited in educational success (Croghan 2000:76-79). This assertion is based on the premise that African languages exert unavoidable influences on English and without an attempt to understand these influences, ‘the evolution of languages in the New World cannot be clearly explained or understood (Babatunde& Shobomehin 2006:151)’.

The resultant Nigerian English has been discussed over and over again in articles and research projects. Quite a number of related articles however have discussed Nigerian English as an Interlanguage (see Jowitt 1991:53) and sociolinguistic variations of Second Language Acquisition (see Preston 1989:239; Adesanoye 1973). In Second Language Acquisition in relation to cultural influences, articles such as (Sapir, 1974:48-49, Cameroon 1997:66, Panley 1997:1, Trudgil 1974:24; Selinker 1972; Corder 1967, 1971 and Dulay and Burt 1973) among others have stated that language use is a function of its immediate environment.

On Nigerian English, Jowitt (1991:56) considers the generally agreed (among linguists) disparity between Nigerian English and the Standard British English as traits of the learning process. He describes the NE Interlanguage situation as one replete with so many limitations that training and education could possibly reduce rather than completely eradicate; the non-standard forms which have resulted from the learners’ socio-cultural environment. Adjemian (1976) cited in Preston (1989:239) sees no difference between a source language and the Interlanguage. On a positive note he points out that Interlanguages are “permeable”. In other words, there is room for shifts, change and transfer of mother tongue and other socio-cultural features into the source language and used as such in the new speech community. Adjemian’s position supports the reason for the socio-cultural influences in NE which are observable as coinages. In the next section we shall explore some of the transfer phenomenon as we have observed in Nigerian English expressions around us and especially in some of our current dailies.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Coinages in Nigerian English present themselves in different morphological dimensions. While some of them are used as compound words, some are one word terms which remain permanent in the lexicon of Nigerian English (see Igboanusi 2002). The compound words are strung together to express concepts of the speakers’ intent. There are several ways by which words are

derived through compounding. It could be through a combination of noun+noun, adjective+adjective, adjective+noun, verb+noun, etc. It should be pointed out that most of the compound words identified in this paper are not context restricted. That is they are meaningful within the language and have their denotative or connotative relevance even outside those contexts of use.

The first category of *coinages* in Nigerian English that would be discussed in this paper includes those with particular semantic implication in the Nigerian Socio-Political system. Such examples are listed follow: Long –Leg, Free-and Fair, Come-of age, Carpet crossing, no-go-area, Man-of timber and caliber, money bag, political juggernaut/heavy-weight, political bride, accord Concordia, bottom power etc., to mention but a few. Many of these lexical items are more or less transitional in nature. In other words, they are short-lived, they hardly attain any permanent use because their short spans do not accrue legitimacy and acceptability to them in order to be incorporated into the standard Nigerian English lexis. As such, they have restricted use and are easily lost over time.

The second category referred to as acronyms include NADECO (National Democratic Electoral Commission), FEDECO (Federal Electoral Commission), ECOMOG (Ecowas Monitoring Group), MAMSER (Mass Mobilization for social and Economic Reliance) etc. Others include government agencies such as NEPA, (National Electric Power Authority), now PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria) NIPOST, (Nigeria Postal Service) NITEL, (Nigeria Telecommunications) NAN, (News Agency of Nigeria) NICON (National Insurance Cooperation of Nigeria) etc. As earlier stated, most of these words do not stand the test of time. They reach climax in terms of relevance after they have been introduced, the birth or death of which are always dictated by a circumstance. For instance, WAI was very prominent in the mid 1980 when it was introduced by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime.

The third category of *coinages* is extracts from pages of Nigerian newspapers. The newspapers consulted include: The Nation, The Nigerian Tribune, and The Herald among others. They include: Allah, overjoyed, the person, quick quick, maiguard, Khaki boys etc. Some of these examples have been compiled in a dictionary by Igboanusi (2002). As earlier stated above the NE coinages experience expiry dates; as long as the government or the governor who sponsored it vacates the position. Thus the coinages reach climax in terms of relevance after they have been introduced, the birth and death of which are always dictated by a circumstance. For instance, WAI was very prominent in the mid 1980 when it was introduced by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime. The acronym was then on the lip of every Nigerian. It provided a basis for the nation's ethic and psyche. It was synonymous with transparency, honesty, dedication to duty, patriotism and orderliness. But when the programme was cancelled by the succeeding Babangida regime the word lost its potency and faded out.

Similarly, the cases of FEDECO, NADECO and MAMSER are noteworthy. FEDECO was prominent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic but phased out when it was replaced with NEC during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic and now it has been replaced with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) during the current 4<sup>th</sup> Republic. National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) was prominent at the peak of the struggle for the actualization of the annulled June 12 election but has gradually faded out with the end of military rule. MAMSER is also another coinage that has

lost the attention it received during the Babangida era before it was renamed – the National Orientation Agency (NOA). Lack of continuity in most of the nation’s policies also contributed to the emergence and loss of these words.

The word ‘settlement’ especially is another word coined to give a more acceptable picture of bribe, gratification or palm greasing used as means of winning favour. Although, the word ‘egunje’ is more widely used, ‘settlement’ appears more acceptable in official circle. ‘Settlement replaces kickback and 20% which were in use at various times in the past. The scope of use of ‘settlement’ is wider than ‘kickback’ and 10% because the duo merely cover contract awards. Settlement on the other hand may include payment for someone to carry out an illegitimate assignment like payment to influence people’s decision with money; cover up crime and fraud, buy or suppress information that is considered detrimental to one’s career; to illegitimately pass examination or get a job, etc. The settlement syndrome often transcends monetary benefit in terms of times. It involves sexual harassment and bribery. ‘Bottom power’ and ‘long leg’, are other coinages that involve the use of sexual intercourse and money respectively to lobby. In Nigeria, success is at times determined by one’s ‘long leg’, i.e., who one knows at the topmost echelon of an organization or the society at large. The use of the word came to limelight as a result of influence of women’s sexual influence popularly referred to as ‘bottom power’.

The politicians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic most especially K.O. Mbadiwe are credited with coinages such as “accord Concordia”, “man of timber and caliber”, “juggernaut”, “political heavy weight”, “political bride,” etc. Mbadiwe coined “accord Concordia” to qualify the soundness of coming together of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) symbolized by its presidential candidate, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. In fact, the ruling and opposition parties did not form a clear majority in the parliament. Both required the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest party in the parliament (NPP) either to assume clear leadership or pose strong opposition respectively. It is in the attempt to woo Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe and his NNP to either side that he was nicknamed ‘political bride’. Mbadiwe K.O. also coined ‘man- of timber and caliber as well as ‘political juggernaut’s of an individual’s popularity and followership in his party and constituency. ‘Carpet crossing’ referred to decamping from one political party to join another. A canvasser’ is one who is paid to go round to campaign for a particular candidate and make sure that the people turn up en masse at polling stations on election day. ‘Money bags’ are individuals who assumed leadership of political parties because they have the enormous financial capacity. They pay the piper and dictate the tune. This was rampant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic.

‘Maradona,’ ‘no go area,’ ‘419’, etc., ‘step aside’ are coinages prominent during the regime of President Babangida. Babangida was nicknamed Maradona because of the manner of his rulership. It was even a popular assertion that the only thing that was consistent about him was his inconsistency. Diego Amando Maradona, a soccer wizard, on the other hand, as the Argentina football captain in the 1986 world cup dazzled the entire world with his soccer artistry and scored a controversial goal with ‘the hand of God’. He led Argentina to win the cup and contributed immensely towards the feat. His soccer prowess is likened to the way Babangida dribbled Nigerians, and the fact that he was a master in his own game of unpredictability.

Sociolinguistically, a word such as Allah, i.e., the Arabic language word for God is traceable to the Arabian nations and Northern Nigeria. It is a borrowing into English which has remained a

popular usage especially among Muslims when they refer to God. Similar to this word is the word 'emirate' which has found its way into the English Lexicon (see Oxford Advanced Learners' English dictionary). The sources of these words are the Islamic religion and the Hausa – Fulani cultures respectively.

The compound word, 'over joyed' was found on page 38 of 'The Nation' newspaper on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2010. The word 'Joy' is supposed to be noun. The compound word was used as an adjective in the sentence – 'the man was overjoyed...' 'Over joyed' is a transfer of the sense in being very happy or joyous. The compound word- 'quick quick' is a direct translation of the Yoruba word, 'kia kia'. Both the words 'khaki' and 'mai guard' originate from Hausa language.

Metaphorically, certain words derive their meanings. For instance the word 'cool' in the phrase 'cool down' is indicative of calming down or relaxing one's temper. The metaphor of calming is thus cooling. Other examples include 'fresh blood' to mean 'new hands' which mean 'new set of employees' or 'worker' to perform specific roles. The sense in freshness is newness while the sense in blood or hands indicates 'people'. Metaphors could be understood and used by educated speakers of English. Thus the usage of metaphoric expressions in Nigerian English confirms the users' cognitive superiority over the ordinary learners of English. Several other metaphorical expressions are compiled in Babatunde and Shobomehin (2007:145-172).

Finally, the emergence of most of the words discussed in this paper is merely circumstantial, a reflection of the situation that bred and nurtured them. However, these words have no place in Nigerian English because they do not stand the test of time. They are mere creations of particular situations and they die gradually with the circumstance that gave them nature. Most of them exist only in history and not in the vocabulary of any language.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to explain the sociolinguistic reasons for new forms of expressions identified as peculiarly non-native and Nigerian. We are concluding on the note that most of the coinages in Nigerian English are a result of the diffusions occurring between two cultures, i.e., the attempt to express the socio-political and cultural experiences of Nigeria in Standard English. Were there standard forms of English in the dictionary or other referential sources, Nigerians would have consulted such rather than describe events, matters, opinions and above all ideologies in their own innate experiences.

It is also important that we note that the ability of a non-native speaker of English to use metaphoric expressions, appropriate to describe some ideas, is indicative of the speaker's level of competence in the second language. For instance, metaphors shape thoughts and how thoughts are harnessed is culture bound or dependent. This is the situation in a non-native English speech community such as Nigerian English. We hope this paper has corroborated earlier findings or better still has revealed a new perspective from which Nigerian English coinages can be viewed.

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