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## CRITERIA FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF NON-STANDARD NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A JOURNEY INTO THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC LEVEL.

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### ABSTRACT

Although the emergence of Nigerian English was graced with derision and utter negligence, the fact that it exists cannot be denied. Its existence was predicated on its survival of all the arsenal of criticism preferred against it at the early stage when it was learning how to operate in a wider speech community like Nigeria peopled by personalities of diverse opinion, experience, culture and affiliations. Despite the pride of place, it occupied in the Nigerian community, some people still find it extremely difficult to decipher which is Nigerian English from other brand of English; say American, British and Australian at one hand and to distinguish between standard Nigerian English and non Standard Nigeria English. It is on that premise that this paper will concentrate on the factors that can easily identify when sentences are used in the Nigerian English pattern.

### 1.0 The Brief History of the Emergence of Nigerian English

There is no agreed date as to when English language was first used in Nigeria. However, the first time noticeable disparity was documented in the use of English in Nigeria was after the British handed over power to Nigerian and many of them went back to their country. The places that were initially managed by British citizens were then controlled by Nigerians. The most prominent of all was the teaching field. Most of the people who were taught by British teachers became teachers in many schools in Nigeria. Then expressions that were slightly different from the ancestor began to surface and many frowned at it. The trend became so pronounced that it sparked arguments. While the arguments were going on, some scholars discovered that there were things and ideas which the British language could not provide adequate expressions for. For that reason, the new English tried to do justice to that. Hence, what Nigerians spoke was a new brand of English. From the scholarly opinions and postulations, Adedimeji (2007) drew a conclusion that scholars were pitched into two schools of thoughts. First was the deviation school and the second was the variation school of thought. The deviation school of thought believed that there was

nothing like Nigerian English. Anything spoken which did not conform to the hallowed British English was a deliberate deviation from the tenths of British English which forms the numerator for standard analysis. At the other hand, the variation school saw it as a new development devoid of foreign origin. To further buttress the points, Jowitt (1991) says that Nigerian English to the deviation school was welcomed with derision and hostility. They feel that Nigerian English is an inferior, botched tenth variety of English that is equated to pidgin. To them American English was an imitation of British English while Nigerian English was a deformed creature which ought not to be mentioned in a good society. Adedimeji (2007) also said in summary that the deviation school saw Nigerian English as a concatenation of errors underpinning the superficial mastery of standard British English by Nigerians. Conversely, the variation school stood anathema to the negative projections and postulations of the deviation school. The scholars of the variation school, here represented by Bamgbose (1982) are of the opinion that the discovery of the differences in the usage provides ample evidence that Nigerian English exists. They see, or the variation school sees Nigeria English as a variety of the English language that should be accepted for its distinctiveness as it finds its way into the spoken English

of Nigerians. This is coming after many expressions which British English could not cover became prominent in literary works of highly educated Nigerians. Similarly, Adetugbo (2009) says that the distinctiveness of Nigerian English is enshrined in its features and the features set it apart. It was from that point that many definitions of Nigerian English emerged. Achebe, quoted in Banjo (1996) says *“I feel that the English language in Nigeria will be able to carry the weight of my African experience, but it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its African surrounding.”* Similarly, Bamgbose (1982) defined Nigerian English *“as the conglomeration of legitimate variants of English in Nigeria which retains intelligibility and reflects a common Nigerian cultural perspective of the world, has mother tongue interference and a common socio-political environment.”* To further cement the existence of Nigerian English, Soyinka (1988) referenced by Bamgbose says, *“When we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint it in, we must begin by co-opting the entire properties in our matrix of thought and expression. We must stress such a language, stretch it, impact and compact it, fragment and reassemble it with no apology, as required to bear the burden of expression and experiences, be such experiences formulated or not in the conceptual idioms of the language.”*

## 2.0 Criteria for the Identification of Nigeria English

In identifying Nigerian English, it is pertinent to note that we still regard British English as the standard. Quirk (1972) has a friendlier and comprehensive definition of what a standard language is all about. He says that a standard language is an ideal mode of expression that we seek when we wish to communicate beyond our immediate community. By this, he implied a version that every one strives to acquire devoid of any regional influence. The problem associated with using British English as the standard is hinged on the number of

speakers. Many scholars say that the number of people that use the Received Pronunciation is five percent of the world’s population. Because of that, many persons questioned seriously the position the status of British. In a similar way, Jowitt (1991) is of the view that the concept of standard English is ambiguous since it could mean the English spoken by majority of the educated people or mean the English which comes up to a prescribed standard of excellence. Going by that, the question begging for an urgent answer is, should British English be the standard? Quirk went further to say that we do not only have standard in language but standards. Any language that has a refined form can be said to have a standard. This was done to soften the monopoly which British English has enjoyed and rather give a frame work for the analysis of other languages in line with what is obtainable in different speech communities. We take Standard English as it is used in this work as a deliberate attempt by the society to create a body of rules or yardstick by which grammaticality of English sentences could be measured.

We will still make our comparison with Standard British English since Nigerian English is an offshoot of British English. Again, we follow descriptive approach in the identification against the prescriptive approach. This is important because we agree with the variation school where Achebe, Soyinka and Bamgbose had given us the core nature of what qualifies as Nigerian English. This of course includes those Nigerians who use the Received Pronunciation par excellence. Recall that the variation school upholds that there should exist, a subtle difference from the standard British English. On that note, there are not regarded as errors rather variations. Below are some of the criteria used to identify non standard Nigerian English.

1. **Shift from preposition to verb:** Some speakers of English in Nigeria, mostly the market women shift some prepositions to the verb paradigm. This is what a native speaker of English cannot do even when he is under the influence of narcotics. There are many examples. Some of them are

s/n	Nigerian Usage	British Usage
1	Off the light	Switch off the light
2	On the tap	Switch on the tap
3	On the engine	Switch on the engine

## 2. A shift of a verb from transitive to intransitive status.

1	I met him and we discussed for a long time	I met with him and we discussed the matter for a long period.
2	If you want to enjoy, you must work hard.	If you want to enjoy your life, you must work hard.

3.	The minister assured that they were looking into the matter.	The minister assured Nigerians that they were looking into the matter.
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**3. Difference in Semantic Value.**

- NE:** I want to branch at his house.
- BE:** I want to call at his house.
- NE:** I am at your back.
- BE:** I am behind you.
- NE:** I want to stop at Ezzamgbo Junction.
- BE:** I want to alight at Ezzamgbo Junction.

**4. Peculiar idiomatic expressions.**

- NE:** A tree doesn't make a forest
- BE:** one swallow doesn't make a summer
- NE:** what is good for the goose is good for the gander
- BE:** sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander
- NE:** the devil you know is better than the angel you don't know
- BE:** better the devil you know than the angel you don't
- NE:** Half bread is better than none
- BE:** better half a loaf than none.

**5. Pluralization of non- count nouns**

- NE:** Lions protect their offsprings fiercely.
- BE:** Lions protect their offspring fiercely.
- NE:** my jewelries worth five million dollars.
- BE:** my jewelry worth five million dollars.
- NE:** the dictator won because he bought over the electorates.
- BE:** the dictator won because he bought over the electorate.

**6. Unnecessary inclusion of preposition.**

- NE:** my uncle advocated *for* a new approach.
- BE:** my uncle advocated a new approach.
- NE:** we discussed *about* the recent increment in salary.
- BE:** we discussed the recent increment in salary.
- NE:** Isidore stressed *on* the importance of sincerity in an organization.
- BE:** Isidore stressed the importance of sincerity in an organization.

Similarly, Okoro (2009) lists mostly phrasal verbs as part of Nigerian English. He, however, gave a clarification that the inclusion is just because it is frequently used in Nigeria than other part of the world. Again, other English, say British English has formed a sound replacement for those phrasal verbs; hence left the formal as informal expressions. Some of the phrasal verbs are listed below

**7. Informal**

Give up  
Give in  
Get over  
Put up with  
Do away with  
Cut down on  
Take after

**formal**

abandon  
surrender  
overcome  
tolerate  
abolish  
reduce  
resemble

**8. The semantic extension of some words.**

Okoro went further to state that despite obvious deviations noticed in the use of Nigerian English, there are situations where Nigerians use the exact lexemes of the British English to create entirely different meaning other than what the owners of the language knew. For instance, the words written in italic in each sentence have different meaning.

- I can *hear* a smell (smell something)
- The food is too *sweet*. (very delicious)
- The *dowry* is high. (bride price)
- I don't *hear* Yoruba (understand)
- My *senior* brother is here. (elder)

Dadzie (2009) made almost the same observation that others made in identifying Nigerian English. He discovered with dismay that some Nigerians drop articles before nouns.

**9. Dropping of articles before nouns**

**Nigerian English**

He died of stroke  
He had heart attack  
I am going to bank  
He is not in school

**Standard British English**

He died of a stroke.  
He had a heart attack.  
I am going to the bank  
He is not in the school

**10. Shift from either noun or adjective to verb.**

**Nigerian English**

He is a salaried man  
I bought a coloured television  
She is matured enough to marry

**Standard British English**

the man earns salary  
I bought a colour television  
she is mature enough to marry.

**11. A mixture of British and American version of English language in expressing ideas.**

There are significant differences in British and American English in naming items. The two major versions in the world are not in agreement as to what should be called some items. Nigerians select from either sides when speaking or writing. This is contrary to what a British man would do. In the speech pattern of a non standard Nigerian speaker, the versions feature in the naming of items. Below are examples.

<b>British</b>	<b>American</b>
Dynamo	generator
Nought	zero
Dustin	garage can
Paraffin	kerosene

**Nigerian**  
generator  
zero  
dustbin  
kerosene

Similarly, non standard users of Nigerian English use British and American spellings interchangeably. A secondary school user of English Language uses both versions comfortably. An American user of English can easily fail such student in an examination. But we understand ourselves here.

Honour	honor
Cheque	check
Favour	favor
Programme	program
Colour	color

honour/honor  
cheque/check  
favour/favor  
programme/program  
colour/color

**3.0 CONCLUSION**

Language is apparently part of the culture of the people. The discussion of the criteria above is of immense importance. Many persons will begin to know NIGERIANS by the language they speak. Just like Adekunle (1974) which upholds that Non Standard Nigerian English must showcase local coloring developed within ethno linguistic environment. Most Nigerians involuntarily manifest the above discussed criteria. Therefore, one who arms himself with these pieces of knowledge can easily detect the nativity of one. I have personally detected many internet fraudsters on different social media through the use of language. One cannot claim to be a British citizen while manifesting the speech pattern of Nigerian obviously in both the written and the spoken forms. Again, for those in academics required to have publications in International journals, the knowledge above will be of immense benefits. If you can avoid, to a great extent the features of Nigerian English which are not yet intelligible to the international community, then your work has high chances of being accepted. Conversely, there are Nigerians who can write without engaging in the non standard features. Those ones are

still Nigerians, using Nigerian English but the Standard version. In other words, the standard Nigerian English maintains intelligibility to the British English save cultural expressions and inventions that are not universal.

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