The Patterns of Nonstandard English Words Used in the Written Communication of Selected Students of Higher Institutions in Kaduna State

TERNA-ABAH, Martha Nguemo

1 Department of English Studies, Nigerian Turkish Nile University, Abuja, 08065567519, martha@ntnu.edu.ng

This paper examines the patterns of nonstandard English words used in the written communication of selected students of institutions of higher learning in Kaduna State. It looks at the variability of the English language with regards to standard and nonstandard English and their various sub varieties. The paper which is limited to nonstandard lexical items thus identifies and extracts these items from students’ answers to examination questions and thereafter examines their patterns of occurrence. Based on the identified nonstandard words, the author discovers that these lexical items take the following patterns: the shorthand associated with the language of Short Message Services (SMS), English slang, Nigerian Pidgin, code-mixing of non-English words from Hausa, Arabic and Yoruba with Standard English expressions, contracted forms of English words and finally, abbreviations. The author draws a conclusion after discussing these patterns in details with ample examples.

INTRODUCTION

The English language like any other living language is remarkably varied in the Nigerian context and anywhere else. According to Wardhaugh, "no language spoken by more than a very small number of people is homogeneous"(15). Every language has considerable internal variations and speakers make constant use of the many different possibilities offered to them. In Nigeria, the English language has developed many varieties ranging broadly from Standard English to nonstandard. The Standard English has varieties such as the Standard British English which is the widely accepted and institutionalized standard variety for academic purposes in Nigeria, the Standard American English (whose spellings have gained prominence in Nigeria with the advent of the computer) and the Standard Nigerian English, while nonstandard forms include: English slang, English pidgin and other forms of colloquial expressions. In the words of Jowitt, Standard English has come to be used as, “a label for either the more or less institutionalized sub variety of a great number of Englishes around the world... a reflection of what has been called International or World Standard English”(8) Crystal also views the Standard English of an English speaking country as:

a minority variety (identified chiefly by its vocabulary, grammar and orthography) which carries most prestige and is most widely understood....A prestige variety used as an institutionalized norm in community; forms not conforming to this norm are said to be nonstandard or pejoratively substandard(110,459).
For the purpose of this paper however, emphasis shall be on the nonstandard English which is discussed below.

NONSTANDARD ENGLISH

Nonstandard English according to Corder and Ruszkiweicz is most often defined by: its vocabulary, its sounds or its grammatical construction and its appropriateness in discussions of informal or humorous situations and activities such as sports...nonstandard English is the same with informal English ...it is marked as colloquial in dictionaries and most of those marked as slang(10)

Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen, Radford and Spencer posit that nonstandard varieties (sometimes called ‘dialects’) are often considered to be “lazy, ungrammatical forms, which betray a lack of both educational training and discipline in learning”(15) Although this view according to them is sometimes strongly opposed by linguists who maintain that the study of language use has shown not only that nonstandard varieties exhibit grammatical regularity and consistent pronunciation patterns in the same way that standard varieties do, but also that a vast majority of people will use nonstandard features at least some of the time in their speech.

In the same vein, Parker and Riley submit that nonstandard English is “any dialect of English other than Standard English”. They go further to state that, it is a term used disapprovingly to describe ‘bad’ or “incorrect” English. To them, a nonstandard dialect “does draw negative attention to itself”. That is, educated people might judge the speaker of such a dialect as socially inferior, lacking education and so on. They go further to state that “a nonstandard dialect has socially marked forms- one that causes the listener to form a negative judgment of the speaker” (25-26). In the words of Alo, nonstandard English is “that which may be used by people who are intimate (e.g. friends, husband and wife) and allows such devices as direct references, interjections, abbreviations and so on”(16).

From the various definitions of the nonstandard English, we see that nonstandard English or informal English is not meant for official use in formal contexts but rather, it is the expected choice of variety for informal discourses outside official or academic related matters. Nonstandard English is thus that which students are expected to use while interacting with their fellow students, friends and other acquaintances. On the contrary however, the use of nonstandard and non-English words in formal contexts that call for Standard British English is now prevalent among some students of institutions of higher learning in general and those within Kaduna state in particular. It is not uncommon to come across nonstandard and non-English words in the written communication of students where nonstandard English words like the shorthand associated with the Global System Mobile Communication’s Short Message Service (GSM/SMS), the English slang and non-English words from Pidgin English and some of Nigeria’s indigenous languages as well as other forms of colloquial lexical items feature prominently.

In light of the foregoing, this paper examines the patterns of nonstandard/non-English words used by selected students of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Kaduna State University, Kaduna and Kaduna Polytechnic, Kaduna. Although the use of these nonstandard features in formal contexts affects all levels of language such as the phonological, syntactic, morphological, semantic, discourse levels and so on, this paper is limited to the use of nonstandard words used in the written
communication of the target group because of the enormity of attempting to examine all the levels of language.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data for this paper was obtained from students’ examination scripts of the 2010/2011 academic session across four institutions in Kaduna state. Some of the questions asked in the first and second semester examinations in compulsory general English courses and some few others were:

1. Of late there has been an increase in the rate at which people are being kidnapped. Write an open letter to the Inspector General of Police on the measures that can be adopted to eradicate the menace.


3. The outcome of the immediate past presidential polls led to civil unrest in some parts of your country and a six man committee was set up by the state government to uncover the causes of the unrest, determine the extent of damages to life and property, identify the culprits and suggest steps to take against a recurrence of the incident in future. In your capacity as the secretary of the committee, write out your report using the schematic format.

4. What is forecast?

5. Define parturition.

6. You are the Executive Director of a business centre. Using the fully blocked format, write a letter to a foreign supply company to supply you with some computer systems to replenish your business centre.

**DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

Considering the brevity of this paper, thirty-six sentences presented below were randomly extracted from students’ essays which were selected from the initial one thousand used for the main research. Care was taken to ensure an even spread of nine sentences each across the four institutions used as case study.

1. * If we have enof S.S.S in our country this problem will be reduced.
2. *As I sujest sir, there are ways that police role….
3. * ...Alhamdulillah, we have little cases of kidnap now.
4. * The attitude of the people to be rich or grid during the democracy….
5. *...there will not be problems in Nigeria if they should conduct electn….
6. *Incentive should be given to any police that cot any kidnapper.
7. *… if there will be security check point after 5km to 10km…
8. * The inspector can also stop this through this vigilante groups, operation yaki, soldiers, policemen etc.
9. *…they masakad the victim….
10. *All the almajiris in Zaria were part of those killing people, burning houses etc.
11. *if they saw a man, if they don’t trust him instead of killing him…
12. *Some even use okada to kidnap people.
13. *Taking drop in Kd now is very dangerous.
14. *This *occur about 15mins_after the foetus is expelled.
17. *Stage 2: the expulsion of the baby (giving birth) takes 1hr.
18. *Defn: Labour can be defined as …. 
19. *The role of progesterone & oestrogen: during pregnancy there is high concentration of progesterone & oestrogen both of which inhibit prolactin & …. 
20. *I ope that with this little point of correction, you will put the record straight.
21. *According to the Nigerian constitution, a president or governor can only spend a maximum of 4yrs
22. *It took them a very long time to see those who hawk water known as mairuwa.
23. …fashion changes from one generation to another example of the recent way of dressing is the guys sagging their trousers….
24. Forecast can be defined as the prediction of the future that goes beyond the power of the clergys, Aladuras, Alfa, Babalaws, mallams or Baba Alaoo.
25. *They don’t give a damn as they are killing innocent souls.
26. *The person who drop from the first bus entad another bus again….
27. *Pls sir, I want you to put on more effort on that….
28. *They go out with fek ….
29. *People are being kidnapped everyday like chickens in a cage, it worries me most we rely felt your impact
30. *…if u check, the budget is 30m and not 28m
31. *They were saying sai Buhari, sai Buhari and started burning tyre on the way
32. *The budgetary dept wish to draw your attentn
33. *In our school, 2 Christian lecturers and many students ie is arne according to them were killed.
34. *Most of the killings during the post election violence were carried out by yaro boys.
35. *Let’s just divide d country to prevent more killings
36. *I need 100 pcs of Hp laptops, 20 pcs of Hp desktop …. 

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the extracted sentences above, it was discovered from the nonstandard and non-English lexical items identified that these items do take particular patterns in their occurrences. These patterns which include the shorthand associated with the Global System for Mobile Communication’s Short Message Service (GSM/SMS), English Slang, English Pidgin and code mixing of non-English words with standard British English expressions are discussed in details below.

The Written Language of Short Message Service (SMS)

One of the patterns of occurrence of nonstandard English words used in the written communication of the target population is that of the shorthand associated with the SMS. With the advent of GSM, Nigerians and particularly students of higher learning now have access to not just telephoning but also to sending of messages on the Short Message Service (SMS) which is considered a cheaper option.

According to Mgbemena, SMS also known as text messaging is, “a feature available in most modern mobile digital phones that allow users to send and also receive graphic messages from 150 to 160 characters to other mobile phones”(2). Similarly, Chiluwa, posits that “the SMS gives the subscriber the advantage of choosing specific number of words that would communicate comprehensively but briefly with minimum cost” (2). Based on the fact that most handsets allow a maximum of 160 characters including space, symbols and punctuation marks on a page, subscribers become constrained by space and in some cases time. In the light of this problem, subscribers become compelled to create new and in fact unique linguistic forms characterized by abbreviations, acronyms and other forms of shorthand to enable them maximize the limited available space and say all that has to be said. Onadeko states that:

Text messages have become a dynamic written communication strategy occurring naturally in practical communication contexts and as discourse are constructed in short texts in either formal or informal modes not always conforming to lexical or...
grammatical rules, but do certainly communicate and are recognized by their writers and receivers as coherent (81-82).

While experienced writers are still able to draw a line between when to use the SMS shorthand and the contexts that do not call for it, many students particularly those that form the subjects of this study have not been able to switch easily or for whatever reasons are not willing to. In order to be brief while texting, lexemes are substituted with the letters of the English alphabet or Arabic numerals. Extracts from the sentences above confirm this thus: “b” is used to replace “be”, “u” is used to replace “you”, “1” is used to substitute “one”, “2” is used to substitute “to”, “too”, “two”, “km” is used to replace “kilometer”, “&” is used to replace “and”, among others. Other forms of shortening in order to maximize space as shown in the sentences above are: “sujest” for “suggest”, “yrs” for “years”, “instead” for “instead”, “mnths” for “months”, “mins” for “minutes”, “defn” for “definition”, “hrs” for “hours”, “wk” for “week”, “pls” for “please” among many others. Although these forms are quite acceptable within the informal context associated with texting particularly at an interpersonal level. As restricted as these SMS shorthand are to the informal contexts, our data has shown how generously the selected students use them in their write-ups during examinations.

**English Slang**

Another pattern taken by the nonstandard words used by the target population is that of English slang. The use of English slang among students of higher learning across the globe has become a common phenomenon. According to Eble, “the creative use of language by college students to grumble to each other about their lot in life and about those in authority must dates back in Western Europe to the earliest days of the universities” (1-2). Public interest in college slang during the latter part of the nineteenth century is shown by the many short and often anecdotal articles on the topic published in newspapers and magazines. Some of these include the works by Eble (1979), (1980), (1983), (1986), (1988), (1989), (1990), (1991), (1992), (1993) which dwell on slang used by students of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

English slang use is not restricted to the United States of America and other parts of the developed world alone. In Nigeria also, there is hardly any institution of higher learning where slang is not used by students especially at informal contexts. This is evident from the website http://www.ngex.com/entertainment/on campus/campus slang which is exclusively for Nigerian campus slang where students from different Nigerian Universities send in slang vocabularies and their meanings as used on such campuses.

Despite the prevalence of particularly English slang among students of institutions of higher learning, most linguists are unanimous in their views about the nonstandard and informal nature of English slang hence its inappropriateness in formal contexts. This is captured succinctly in the words of Grossman and Tucker who believe that slang is, “a nonstandard vocabulary belonging to a particular culture or subculture and consisting of raw and unrefined expressions many of which are considered taboo, vulgar and derogatory” (1) Asher and Simpson quote dictionaries as defining slang with at least two senses: first, “slang is the special, restricted speech of sub-groups or subcultures in the society” and second, “it is a highly informal conventional vocabulary of more general use” (3964).

According to Eble, a survey of writings about English slang confirms not only the marginal status accorded to it but also the
opposing values associated with this status which often “puts slang continually at odds with good grammar and social respectability” (1) Equally, Bolton posits that, “slang makes a poor choice for the writer who wants to address an audience beyond the time and place in which he writes”(354). Quirk et al put slang in a footnote where it is described as an “attitudinal variety outside the common core of English” (56).

Giving that English slang is considered informal and nonstandard as shown by the different definitions discussed above, it is therefore not supposed to be used in formal contexts. Unfortunately however, our data proves otherwise as students of the selected institutions engage in the use of English slang which they code mix with Standard English expressions in their write-ups during examinations without putting such slang words in inverted commas. Examples of these slang words as extracted from the sentences above are: ‘guy’ used instead of ‘man’ or ‘boy,’ ‘damn (don’t give a damn)’ used to replace ‘don’t care at all about something or somebody,’ among others.

**Nigerian/ English Pidgin**

Based on the data obtained from the written communication of our subjects, it was equally discovered that some of the identified lexical items considered as nonstandard took the form of Nigerian Pidgin. Nigerian Pidgin otherwise known as Pidgin English is said to be a variety of West African English spoken all through Anglophone West Africa. In the words of Bamgbose et al, Nigerian Pidgin is “geographically spread all over Nigeria and spoken by Nigerians of different ethnic origins and it is indigenous to Nigeria because it originated and is expanding here in Nigeria” (291).

Historically, Mafemi observes that the emergence of Nigerian Pidgin “lies in the early contacts between Europeans and Africans on the coast... particularly the English who became Nigerians’ trading partners after the Portuguese had left from the beginning of the 17th century onwards”(98) This is also captured in the words of Bamgbose et al thus, “the continued stay of the English, whose number and interests also continued to expand, encouraged the growth of Nigerian Pidgin” (294).

The use of Nigerian Pidgin currently cuts across different strata of the Nigerian society as it is used by the educated and the illiterate, the rich and the poor and so on. This is captured in the words of Elugbe and Omamor that “Nigerian Pidgin is spoken almost anywhere and in all places where it is spoken, it is spoken by illiterates and by university graduates, the lowly as well as those highly placed in the society”(36). These same views are expressed by Akinluyi who observes that, “Pidgin is used in Nigeria by people in various walks of life ranging from the illiterate market women to the university professor; it is used by people of different ages and linguistic backgrounds”(36). Like Elugbe, Omamor and Akinluyi, Adekunle states that, Nigerian Pidgin is “the language most frequently used as the means of inter ethnic communication at the shopping centers, market places, motor parks and even in most informal discussions in the offices and in linguistically heterogeneous cities” (198).

Despite the fact that Nigerian Pidgin for now is being used informally as agreed by many linguists including Adekunle quoted above, it still featured prominently in our subjects’ write-up in formal examination contexts. Some of the examples of English Pidgin words identified from our subjects’ written communication include: “okada”, used for commercial motorcyclist, “drop” used instead of “alight,” “disembark” or “taxi,” “keke napep” used instead of “rickshaw”, “wahala” used instead of ‘trouble,’ among others.
Code Mixing

Our study also shows that one among the ways in which the subjects of this research use nonstandard English is by code mixing both nonstandard and non-English words with Standard English expressions particularly in their written communication. According to Mayerhoff, code mixing generally refers to “alternation between varieties or codes within a clause or phrase” (227). While Mayerhoff sees it as occurring between varieties or codes, Akindele and Adegbite posit that code mixing refers to “a situation whereby, two languages are used in a single sentence within major and minor constituent boundaries. The mixing of items is almost at the word level” (38). Poplack who adopts the label “mixed speech” to refer to code mixing also shares the same views with Akindele and Adegbite that code-mixing occurs between languages. He posits that, code-mixing is “associated with conversation that involves the use of two codes or languages and it is at the level of the lexical or phrasal items” (115). He adds that “nouns are popularly involved in code mixing not only because they are relatively free of syntactic restrictions but also due to the robustness of nouns in lexical items.”

Some of the examples of code mixing of nonstandard English/non-English words with Standard English expressions can be seen in some of the extracted sentences highlighted below:

Example one: Forecast can be defined as the prediction of the future that goes beyond the power of the *clergys, Aladuras, Alfa, Babalaws, mallams or Baba Alaoo

Example two: ...Alhamdulillah, we have little cases of kidnap now.

Example three: Like in Kaduna we have operation yaki which is helping a lot.

Example four: Some of the killings were carried out by yaro boys.

Example five: Some even use okada to kidnap people.

Contracted Forms of English Words

In addition, some of the nonstandard words identified from students’ scripts took the form of contracted forms of words; a feature suitable only for informal writings. These contracted forms include for instance “I’m”, “doesn’t”, “can’t”, “it’s”, “didn’t”, “shouldn’t,” “they’ll” among others.

Use of English Abbreviations

The use of abbreviations which is characteristic of informal writing as Alo (77) states was also another pattern some of the highlighted nonstandard words took. Commonest among these abbreviations were “etc”, “e.g”, “i.e,” “Kd” among others.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to show that there is actually prevalence in the use of nonstandard and non-English words in formal contexts among students of higher learning and particularly those within Kaduna State. In addition, the paper has also demonstrated that the identified nonstandard and non-English words follow certain patterns which include SMS shorthand such as “b”, “u”, “&”, “mins”, “defn”, “pls”, “yrs” and so on, English slang words such as “guy”, “damn”, English Pidgin such as “okada”, “drop”, “keke napep” “wahala”, English abbreviations such as “i.e.”, “etc” “Kd” among others, English contractions like “doesn’t”, “ope”, “I’m”, “its”, “they’ll and so on and non-English words which are
usually code mixed with English language expressions within the sentence. These words from our findings include “mallam”, “babalawo”, “baba Aloa”, “yaki”, “yaro”, “mairuwa”, “Alhamdulillah” among others.

Similarly, this paper also shows that there is a decline in the quality of students’ written English. Although this study set out to look at nonstandard and non-English words used in formal contexts, it was discovered in the course of extracting these data that, most of the expressions used by students were generally wrong. This explains the authors’ use of asterisk for nearly all the sentences to show that they are grammatically incorrect.

In light of the above therefore, it is hoped that all stakeholders would work tirelessly towards salvaging the Standard English which is viewed as the acceptable variety for official transactions in Nigeria in general and for academic purposes in particular.

REFERENCES

2. _______Review 15.2 (1972): 198 Print
4. _______Press limited,1999. Print
5. Akinluyi, T. O. “The Place of Pidgin in Nigeria and its Educational Implication” Institute of Education,
6. _______University of London, 1971. Print
17. 1979. Print
35. Poplack, Shana. ‘Contrasting Patterns in Code- switching in Two Communities.’ in