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Towards Domestication of English Language in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract:

In the introduction the paper highlights the history of English in Nigeria and the need for the language to adapt to reflect and suit its new environment. It goes further to look at the concept of domestication by way of defining it. It establishes that as a result of domestication, English has been Nigerianised. Furthermore, it examines the levels of domestication of English. It specifically examines lexical, semantic and idiomatic domestication. It also discusses the challenges of domestication of English. The paper makes some recommendations towards enhancing a full autonomy of English in Nigeria and concludes by recognizing it as one of the new dialects of English that deserves to be given the right of full citizenship without any prejudice.

Keywords: *Domestication, Nigerian English, Acculturation*

1. Introduction

The English language in Nigeria is older than the Nigerian nation. It was formally introduced in 1842 by the first batch of missionaries who arrived in Badagry to evangelize as well as educate Nigerians (Tomori, 1981). The British became the colonial masters of Nigeria from the annex of Lagos in 1861. The representatives of the Queen that were sent to look after Her Majesty's colony used as official, the English language which was informally introduced by the early missionaries (Azikiwe, 1998:24).

When a language comes in contact with a new environment, for it to survive, it has to adapt and change to reflect the needs of its new environment. The English language is no exception; the language is about 173 years old in Nigeria (as it was introduced in 1942) competing with about 400 indigenous languages. The English language has become "Home grown" "made native" adapted and tamed to suit the Nigerian environment. The language has been domesticated and acculturated (Adegbija, 2004).

2. Meaning of Domestication and Acculturation

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines acculturation as those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into first hand contact with consequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both of them. The New Dictionary of Sociology defines acculturation as a process whereby an individual or a group acquires the cultural characteristics of another through direct contact and interaction. From an individual point of view, acculturation is a process of social learning similar to adult socialization in which linguistic communication plays an essential role.

From our own dimension, (that is linguistic dimension) the acculturation of English in Nigeria simply means "domestication", "nativisation" or "indigenization" of English in Nigeria (Bangbose, 1995:20-24) (Akere 2005:4) and (Adegbijea, 2004:20). And the acculturated features of English may be referred to as "Nigerianism", we may then say that English in Nigeria has been nativised, nigerianised or given Nigerian citizenship. Just as a domestic servant does what the master requires, so is English in Nigeria made to do precisely what Nigerians want it to do. Bamiro (1991:7) says that acculturation and nativisation of English imply that an internal norm has developed. He comments as follows:

It is useful to discuss Nigerian English in relation to polylectal speech situation in Nigeria which contributes to the nativisation and acculturation of the English language. That an internal norm has developed is evident from the fact that numerous structures that would be totally unintelligible to native speakers of English are officially used at the highest level of government in Nigeria.

In a similar vein Bamgbose (1995:26) observes that the English language has been "pidginized, nativised, acculturated and twisted to express unaccustomed concepts and mode of interaction".

Acculturation and domestication of English have given birth to Nigerian English. Some scholars such as Barann (1975), Prator (1968), Oji (1984) deny its existence and attribute the features referred to as Nigerian English to deviation from standard British English (SBE). Many other scholars such as Adetugbo (1987), Banjo (1995) Adegbija (1989) assert that Nigerian English exists and indeed has numerous sociological sub-types, with the standard sub-variety being the most prestigious.

Several studies have attempted to describe the nature and features of Nigerian English. For instance Bamgbose (1982), Adeniran (1979), Ubahakwe (ed) (1979) Adetugbo (1987), Kujore (1987), Awonusi (1990), Banjo (1993), Odumuh (1984), Adegbija (1989),

Jowitt (1991) etc. Igboanusi (2002) whom we called Dr. Samuel Johnson of Nigeria has gone a little farther forward in the characterization of Nigerian English by producing a dictionary of Nigerian English lexical items. Such studies beyond doubt, demonstrate that the domestication and acculturation of English have gone a long way, or as Awonusi puts it, “English in Nigeria has come of age”.

3. Factors Responsible for the Domestication and Acculturation of English in Nigeria

Acculturation of English in Nigeria is a natural response to the ever emerging linguistic and cultural needs. No language remains the same the moment it leaves its traditional home for a new environment. The following factors could therefore be said to be responsible for the acculturation of English in Nigeria.

- i. Adaptation of English to Nigerians’ needs
- ii. Influence of indigenous languages
- iii. Influence of media through their creativity
- iv. Influence of Nigerian cultures which are different from the British culture.
- v. Formal character of English taught in Nigeria.

These factors are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Adaptation of English to Nigerian people’s needs has given birth to what is called Nigerian English. Nigerian people’s world view and experiences are different from that of British/American people. Because of these, there has been some level of adjustment in Nigerian usage of English different from that of British English in areas of meaning, vocabulary, Syntax, Morphology amongst others. That is why Banjo (1975:12) observes that: “the English language cannot be a linguistic island and so has to react and adapt to the new social and linguistic environment”.

Influence of indigenous languages is another factor that aided the acculturation of English in Nigeria. In fact researches conducted have shown that Nigeria has the highest number of L2 speakers number of English in the world. It is estimated to be 43 million (Akere, 2005). This number of Nigerians that use English as a L2, already have their L1 or MT. These Nigerians often transfer some features of their L1 or MT to L2 (English). It is in line with this that Adekunle (1979:39) notes that: “English has come to a new ethno-linguistic environment and its contact with local languages and speech habits, its use to project local customs and traditions, has naturally resulted in its being assimilated into local culture and being given a new local colour”.

Another factor that facilitated the acculturation of English in Nigeria is the influence of media through their creative use of English which bears a distinctive feature of Nigerianness. In affirmation to this, Adebija (1989:172) attributes the existence of Nigerian English to:

The indomitable, pervasive and omnipresent media influence, either in brining entirely new words into existence or in establishing and confirming them. Examples are “bottom power”. (Favour obtained by a woman via her femininity or the granting of sexual favour); “National cake” (assets, rights and privileges to which Nigerian citizens consider themselves entitled).

Furthermore, influence of Nigerian culture on English which is different from that of British is another factor for consideration. Language is a medium/ vehicle for cultural expression. Nigerians have acculturated English. For example, the meaning of the word ‘sorry’ in Nigeria today is not the same thing with British meaning. A native British speaker of English can only use the word ‘sorry’ if he is wholly responsible for what has happened. But because of cultural differences, Nigerian users of English have extended the meaning to cover wide spectrum of areas such as sympathy over certain losses of valuables, bereavement etc.

Another reason cited in Adebija (1989) for acculturation of English in Nigeria is the predominantly formal character of the English language taught in Nigeria, which has made English in Nigeria rather “bookish”, formal and sometimes affected. Consequently, big words or ‘jaw breaking words’ are seen as symbols of erudition and knowledge ability. Bamgbose (1995:17) cites expressions like: “this is the domiciliary edifice erected by Musa” as being preferable to the simple; “this is the house Musa built”.

4. Levels of Domestication and Acculturation of English

Frankly speaking, domestication and acculturation of English in Nigeria can be felt in almost all the components of the language; grammatically, syntactically, semantically, lexically, phonologically and even idiomatically. However, this paper briefly considers lexical, semantic and idiomatic acculturation of the language only.

5. Lexical Domestication

Lexical acculturation is perhaps the most documented of all levels of acculturation that have occurred. This ranges from coinages to hybridization.

6. Coinages

This is a situation where entirely new terms are created for new experiences. For example: native doctor, tight friend (close friend), go-slow (traffic jam), Parlour (living/ sitting room), Cash Madam (wealthy woman), chewing stick (a short, fibrous piece of light coloured wood which can be softened by biting and moistening and serves indigenous culture for cleaning teeth) etc.

7. Hybridization

This is a situation where there is a combination of a word or sense of a word in the indigenous language with a word or sense of a word in English e.g. Bukateria,(canteen) Sapele water.(local gin)

8. Direct Translation/ Transliteration

This is a situation where a word or expression is translated directly from the indigenous languages. For example; bush meat(), long leg(), godfather(), sugar daddy() etc. Recent manifestation of the continuing domestication and acculturation of English lexis in Nigeria include: settlement (for silencing a person) 'step aside' (for a temporary withdrawal from a position) 'maradona – (for a wily, deceptive person).

9. Semantic Domestication

This is a situation where the meaning of an expression or a word is reduced, extended, or completely changed as result of cultural differences. For example; expressions like: 'I am coming' "let me land" "He is not on seat" are all English expressions that have been acculturated semantically. Also a word like 'sorry' which is supposed to be an expression of apology, has its meaning been extended to cover bereavement or sympathy over certain losses of some valuables. Also, an expression like: "I have not seen any woman for the past two years" is an expression that has been totally acculturated semantically and pragmatically. This expression conveys a different meaning in Nigerian context from native English context. In Nigerian context, it means the speaker has not slept with any woman for the past two years.

10. Idiomatic Domestication

Idioms seem to be the most acculturated aspect of English in Nigeria. There is no clear demarcation between lexical and idiomatic acculturation as many writers often lump the two together. This is because many of the processes that operate in the acculturation of lexical items are similar to those operating in the acculturation of idioms. An example is the modification of verbal particles in one form or another resulting in idiomatic expressions like "cope up with" instead of "cope with" "off head" instead of 'by heart' etc.

It also involves a direct transliteration of the sense of an idiom in a native language into English to create a new idiom. For example: "tight friend"(close friend) "to hear a smell"(to perceive odour) "long leg"() etc.

It as well involves coining entirely new idioms. For example; 'cash madam' (wealthy woman) "big boys" (rich young men) "to put in a family way" (to impregnate) "to put to bed"(to give birth)

There is also sense or logic reordering with idioms. For example: "you cannot eat your cake and have it", instead of "you can't both have your cake and eat it".

11. Prospects of Domestication and Acculturation of English in Nigeria

The acculturation of English in Nigeria gives it a status of dialect which is called Nigerian English. Nigerian English therefore belongs to the family of new Englishes or new dialects like Ghanaian English, Pakistan English, Indian English etc. According to Akere (2005) this dialect of English as far as L2 is concerned has the highest number of speakers world over with 43 million.

Furthermore, domestication of English in Nigeria enhances Nigerianisation of English. That is, it gives Nigerian usage a distinctive feature of Nigerianness which is different from Americanness, Canadianness Pakistanness etc.

Acculturation of English gives Nigerians the opportunity to colonise the language. Achebe says in a conference on "African literature and university curriculum in April 1963 on the issue of choice of language for literary expression:

If the Whiteman is not ashamed to colonize us, we should not be ashamed to colonize his language.

English to express local ideas and creative use of the language by Nigerians which sometimes impede its international intelligibility are all aspects of colonization of English. Also, acculturation of English has enhanced proper domestication of English in Nigerian. That is to say, acculturation has given English a Nigerian citizenship..Therefore English is no more a foreigner but a legitimate citizen of Nigeria.

12. Challenges

English has come a long way in Nigeria. It has developed a tap root embedded in the Nigerian psyche, culture and social life and sensibilities. The English language has been indigenized, nativised, domesticated, Nigerianised and fully acculturated.

This poses some challenges which I don't want to call problems. The most obvious challenge is that of the standard variety. The acculturation of English has naturally resulted in the development of several varieties of English in Nigeria varying in nature and character. For instance, Walsh (1967) identifies two varieties as: 'Nigerian English' and 'imperfected English' Banjo (1975) identifies four varieties. Adekunle (1979) and Adesanoye (1980) identify three varieties each. Jowitt (1991) shies away from the problems associated with stating the numbers of varieties of English in Nigeria and postulates, instead a broad – spectrum varieties which he refers to as "popular Nigerian English" and probably above that is standard Nigerian English which he refuses to categorically identify.

Another challenge is that of international intelligibility. The language is so much acculturated that it is prone to being misunderstood, especially by a foreigner just arriving in Nigeria. For instance the use of the word "sorry" as an expression of Sympathy rather than apology. There is also the challenge of acceptability of some features both nationally and internationally. Furthermore, there is tendency of some users committing errors in the guise of Nigerian English. Related to that, there is misconception regarding what Nigerian English is all about. Many people Perceive Nigerian English to be pidgin and non – standard English. Even some Nigerian English scholars who are suppose to champion the course of Nigerian English denounce its existence.

13. Recommendations

In the words of Adebija (2004) “while many linguistic features that have been domesticated and acculturated can pass the candidacy test of the “Nigerian English” not every item of English used in Nigeria is passable as “Nigerian English “. This highlights the need for a standard variety of Nigerian English among all the different varieties heard and spoken within Nigeria. Thank God the first step has been taken by Igboanusi (2002) by producing the first dictionary of Nigerian English items.

Nigerians should endeavour to use English in such manner that it will be intelligible to other users of English outside Nigeria. It doesn't tell good of us as a nation, that our leaders' speeches are close captioned on satellite cable (especially CNN or BBC) before they can be understood by other users of English around the globe.

Users of English in Nigeria should avoid committing errors in the guise of Nigerian English. They should be able to differentiate what Jowitt (1991) calls institutionalized errors from non-institutionalized ones. They should be able to differentiate variants from deviants. Furthermore, adaptation and acculturation of English in Nigeria should be recognized by Nigerians and non – Nigerians alike as a new variety of English just like any other dialects around the world. Its codification toward its standardization should be embraced by all and sundry.

14. Conclusion

English has come to stay; it has become Nigerian's property. The domestication of English in Nigeria is an ongoing process. It is a process that declares boldly that English is being accepted on our own terms and subtly implies that native Speakers of English no longer have copyright over their language. In the words of Adebija (2004:3) “Even though English was transplanted on our soil through Colonialism, we have accepted it, made it a son of the soil and conferred on it all the rights and the privileges of a native born...” Therefore all we need to do is to help the English language to become fully acculturated in its new home (Nigeria).

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