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*A PRAGMATIC  
ANALYSIS OF  
LEXICAL  
CREATIVITY IN  
THE USE OF  
NIGERIAN  
ENGLISH*

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of Language among human beings is to communicate ideas feelings or thoughts. However, human beings are found in groups characterized by various shades of linguistic habits which control their interactions. Hence, it is not farfetched that they become creative when using language in any given context. In view of this, this paper takes a pragmatic analysis of lexical creativity in the use of Nigerian English. Data were gathered from focused discussions among Higher National Diploma Students of Federal Polytechnic, Kebbi randomly selected from two departments of the school. It became evident that Nigerian English contains some lexical items through some morphological processes like borrowings, compounding, acronyms, among others, in a bid to make themselves understood as not break the sociocultural norms that rule the Nigerian linguistic context. Hence, their speeches most often can best be understood from the perspective of pragmatics.*

**Keywords: Pragmatics, Nigerian English, Lexical Creativity, Usage**

**Introduction**

The fact that English language has spread globally has demystified the position and the fear of sole ownership or copyright in its usage. This factor is so as speakers who laid claim to it as their mother tongue are no longer the sole users of English language. This buttressed the fact that ownership of any given language exists with the totality of those who use it and not necessarily with those whom the language emerged from, for sociolinguistic researches have proven that languages are shaped by general usage (Brumfit 116). Talking about English specifically, according to Dylan Lyons, out of about 7.5 billion people in the world, about 1.5 billion users of English Language dotted all over the continents of the world, only about half of this number have the language as their native language and around 360 million has it as their first language (n. pag.). Hence, the larger number of non-native speakers determine what happened to it in practice and maintenance as well as the determination of the ideologies and beliefs associated with it (Brumfit 116). Therefore, as the non-native speakers of English outnumbered the native speakers and those using it as their first language, this has subjected the language to the mercy of the most populous users who are interestingly those who use it as the second language or

otherwise. Hence since the use of English language has both monolingual and plurilingual edges, adaptation and changes to it are often largely compelled by the non-native users. Hence, one must bear in mind that the fate of English language no longer rests on monocultural background of Britain and others where English language is nativised, but there are global phenomenal forces buffeting it today giving credence to such intra-linguistic designations as World Englishes, Modern Englishes, New Englishes, etc. (Jenkins 117).

In view the foregoing, New Englishes is a linguistic concept that sprouted forth some decades past. According to Abott (as cited in Onwukwe 24), it comprises of varieties of English language that evolved in nations where English is a second language. As such countries like Nigeria Tanzania, India, Ghana and Uganda have, as a result of linguistic contact, brought about varieties English that can best be categorized as New Englishes. Also, factors such as international politics, relations, trade, the quest for territorial expansion, science and technology have positioned English as a world language against other languages as Arabic, Spanish, French, etcetera. Like all other nations, Nigeria is networked into the ring of events occasioned by information

and communication technology. Thus, whatever happens anywhere in the world will be impressed on it directly or indirectly.

In Nigeria, the importance of English goes beyond the nominalistic position of a second language to the performance of crucial functions as for national survival as well as the sustenance of the Nigerian balance in the world economic order (Onuigbo and Eyisi 72). This, no doubt, is the reason that much effort has been geared towards its stabilization and standardization bringing about such standard of English use that is in all ramifications Nigerian. In view of this, certain lexical inventions and usage are characteristically Nigerian, with much of relativisation that is basically comprehended only within the context of Nigeria.

There are about 450 ethnic based languages in Nigeria and this situation has disposed English language in Nigeria to a lot infractions and inputs occasioned by friction of indigenous languages. While English is a first language to the British, it is not so with Nigerians, Ghanaians, and South Africans etc. This then suggests that the certain features as may have been allowed by this would have created some levels of distinctions through certain features occasioned by regional

peculiarities. This local or regional varieties of English language as brought by domestication in non-native area is a product of socio-linguistic reality known as “Nigerian English” (NE). In view of this, this paper seeks to analyze lexical creativity in the use of Nigerian English from the pragmatics perspective. Hence, based on the nature of this paper, cataloguing all lexical items used in English that are characteristically Nigerian will be a tall task nor is it possible to study all Nigeria’s speakers of English. Thus, this work is limited to focused group of twenty Higher National Diploma Students of Federal Polytechnic, Kebbi randomly selected from two departments, Business Administration and Accountancy, of the school. They were given a speech context for 40 minutes where each one of them takes turn to speak interactively. The secondary data were literatures related to the major concepts herein, in analyzing the primary data.

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **a. Lexical Creativity**

One of the major concepts here enshrined concerns the issue of lexical creativity among the users of English language (in Nigeria context). This concept, lexical creativity, is the ability to create meanings from words as different from what it is used to be known for; it is also the ability to create new words as may not have

been available before through certain linguistic manipulations. According to Munat (as cited in Ofoegbu and Usar 113), lexical creativity concerns textuality with much emphasis on context as new coinages are basically understood based on given contexts. These new lexical items may be short-lived since they lack meaning outside the context of their usage. Lexical creativity is often a product of both conscious and unconscious attempts by speakers or writer of a language usually to achieve communicative goal with a modicum of elegance. Semantically, it is a process of manipulating words towards a particular purpose. It is a morphological process through which lexical items are created consciously or unconsciously when one is speaking or writing, most commonly during speech. The speaker may however be oblivious of the creation but when subjected to morpho-semantic analysis it becomes obvious.

According to Ofoegbu and Usar (113) the following are the basic classifications of lexical creativity:

- i. Coinages:** This is an invention of a new words or terms from existing one (s). Language users do create or coin new words sometimes following sound sequence with regards to alliteration or assonance. It is therefore a creation of new non-

existing terms. Within Nigerian linguistic parlance, the following are basic examples: Omo (a form of detergent), indomie (noodles), close-up (toothpaste), coca cola (a kind of soft drink) etcetera.

**ii. Acronyms:** These are words formed from the combination of initial letters in a group of words. It is formed by combining the first letters of (or, in rare cases, a bit larger part of words) of group of words together to be pronounced as a word. Acronyms can be classified into two; those that can be pronounced as a word and those that can only be pronounced as sequence of the initial letters known as alphabetism.

Examples of those that can be pronounced are:

- a) National Electric Power Authority – NEPA
- b) Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome – AIDS
- c) Economic Community of West African States – ECOWAS
- d) North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO

Examples of acronyms pronounced as a sequence of letters.

- a) United Nation – UN
- b) Automated Teller Machine – ATM
- c) International Monetary Fund – IMF

Examples of acronyms taken from part of the same word:

- a) Television – TV
- b) Tuberculosis - TB

**iii. Compounding:** This is a morphological process in which two or more words are joined together to be pronounced as one and also to function semantically as one (Marchand and Adams qtd in Chukwu). Examples are:

- a) Suitcase
- b) Classroom
- c) Fingerprints
- d) Boardroom
- e) Aircraft
- f) Notebook
- g) Football

Compounding includes copulative words such as Arab-Israel, peace-treaty etc. It also includes appositional compound as “maidservant” or “bittersweet”.

**iv. Borrowing/Loan words:**

Borrowing happens when a word or more are taken from a language to function in the communication context of another or others. Lexical

items are usually borrowed to from one language to the other. Borrowing or loan words provides another fertile ground for lexical creation. It is concerned with the importation of words from foreign language or languages. It is a commonplace that languages of the world, as a result of contact, do often pick terms from another to enrich their vocabulary (Nnamdi-Eruchalu n. pag.). It has been observed that English language has an adaptive spirit that has made it to borrow many words from many other languages. The following are some of the words that was borrowed to English from other languages:

- a) Anonymous (Greek)
- b) Armada (Spanish)
- c) Chest (Latin)
- d) Pavilion (French)
- e) Restaurant (French)
- f) Feast (French)

**v. Clippings:** This is a shortened form of a given word. To clip a word, one has to subtract some syllables from the original word, with the shortening almost always occurring at the beginning of the word (Prasad n. pag.). Examples are:

- a) Aeroplane/Airplane – Plane

- b) Photograph – photo
- c) Memorandum – memo
- d) Polytechnic – Poly
- e) Telephone = phone

Other lexical creativity processes are:

**vi. Derivational morphemes:** These morphological process changes the original word class and the meaning of a word entirely. It implies that derivation creates a novel word class of a given word thus changing its semantic implication(s) entirely (Akabuike n. pag.). Examples are:

- a) Dance (verb) + r – Dancer (noun)
- b) Sing (verb) sing + -er = singer (noun)
- c) Teach (verb) speak + -er = teacher (noun)
- d) (c) Glory (noun) glory + -fy = glorify (Verb)

**vii. Inflectional morphemes:**

Inflections are (bound) morphemes serving as grammatical markers; not necessarily used to create new words but rather to indicate persons, gender, tense and numbers etc. Examples include

- a) ‘s’ = noun plural (ball + s = balls)
- b) ‘s’ = noun possessive John + s = John’s)
- c) ‘-s’ = verb present tense (third person singular) (come + s = comes)

- d) -ing = verb present continuous tense  
(go + ing = going)
- e) ed = verb simple past tense (Walk +  
ed = walked)
- f) -en = verb past perfect participle  
(eat + en = eaten)
- g) -er = adjective comparative (eg big +  
(g)er = bigger)
- h) -est = adjective superlative (eg big +  
(g)estt = biggest) (Ofoegbu and  
Usar, 118 – 123 with emphasis).

**b. Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is one of the linguistic concepts that has proven so tough to explain. However many authors have lent voices to it. For instance, Morris explained it in relation to syntax and semantics which is as an aspect of semiotics; the study of signs (n. pag.). Searle, Kiefer and Bierwisch say that pragmatics “is one of the words . . . that give impression that something quite specific and technical is being talked about when often in fact it has no clear meaning” (iii). Similarly, Yule (cited in Onwukwe 37) assert that “pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn’t actually said (or written)” By this what is void of meaning – “has no clear meaning” or “invisible meaning” is actually the “intended speaker meaning” the central interest of pragmatics (127).

However, sometimes, attempts towards the identification of the intended meaning of a speaker or writer as to be able to decipher that which they meant, one may not be able to arrive at the precise message. Thus, Levinson avers that pragmatics is “the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with contexts in which they are used” (25). In relation to Levinson’s, Denham and Lobeck posit that utterance can be understood when it “is bound up with the context in which you hear it – where you are, what you are doing, who says it, what kind of experiences you’ve had, your cultural expectations, and so on.” Thus, speaker or writer’s intention and the hearer or reader’s interpretation has effect on meaning is the main concern of pragmatics. (331). Therefore to understand meaning of a statement in pragmatics, understanding meaning rest squarely on the context. The context goes beyond the syntactic structure to user-oriented perception of language use as it concerns how the linguistic elements are used in the context of interaction (Mey 39). Various aspects of pragmatics concern various considerations in studying and understanding it.

According to Denham and Lobeck if “...pragmatic differences across cultures collide, communication can break down because speaker intentions... (can) badly

(be) misunderstood” (339). Thus, within Nigerian linguistic context, pragmatics is very important towards the understanding of Nigerian English in view of intelligibility at international level. This is because the culture of the speech communities is a common factor that cut across every varieties of English.

One of the concept that is germane to pragmatics is context. Context in the study of pragmatics is a matter of a great importance. For communication most often depend on context to arrive at a meaningful end. Although Ochs (as cited in Levinson) argue that “the scope of context is not easy to define . . . one must consider the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any given time”. This is because context always incorporates the belief of language users, assumptions and social setting. However, context consists of the understanding of status and role of the major actors in communication, the knowledge of the setting, level of formality, the understanding if the medium of communication, as well as that of the domain. (J. Lyons 574). The above is so, for the understanding of the meaning of what the speaker is saying by the listeners rests largely on the knowledge of the sociocultural environment.

### c. **Nigerian English**

For more than three centuries, Nigeria had having a long history of contact with and usage of English. Although according to Ogu “the advent of the English language in Nigeria is not recorded; neither do we know the first Nigerian to speak the English language” (qtd in Ogunleke). However, one thing stands out, since 1400’s, the country had been making contact with Europe. Donm-Ifod (cited in Ogunleke) argues that languages are said to contact when they are been used alternatively by individuals or group of people. Language contact may not only be as a result of users of being in the same geographical location. Relations such as trades or other avenues that bring about two or more persons to communicate. And as they use the language there may occur deviation known as interference.

Due to their uniqueness, the new Englishes, among which Nigerian English is one, have continued to pose a challenge such as definition, classification, identification, intelligibility, and norm. Although many people have argued against Nigerian English, but according to Adekunle and Adegbija (cited in Ogunleke n. pag.) argue that Nigerian English has become a language that must be reckoned with especially within the Nigerian linguistic context (n. pag.). With regards to its prolific nature, Akere says Nigerian

English is one of the developing varieties of English around the world that can best be understood as a dialect of English as a result of its linguistic interactions between English and indigenous languages. According to Worsfall, Nigerian English is an appendage of English as spoken within Nigerian linguistic context (Ogunleke n. pag.). According to Ajani, Nigerian English is one of the new varieties of the English language that are fast developing all around the globe. Certain features are known to have distinguished Nigerian English from other classification of nativised Englishes in the world. These features can be categorized as lexical, semantic, syntactic and phonological usages, both at spoken and written forms (Odumuh n. pag.). Nwachukwu (cited in Ogunleke n. pag.) also avers that Nigerian English is a combination of “heterogeneous grammatical structures common to Nigerian usage, having varying pronunciation peculiarities as well as socially constrained usage of some lexical items.” Examples include:

- a) Moses is eating ‘tuwo’? (Hausa English)
- b) Let us cook ‘eba’. (Igbo English)
- c) My mother cooked ‘amala’. (Yoruba English)

English has been known as an international language that has been found

useful in international trade, exploration, missionary colonization, and missionary activities in most part of the world. Further to this, Bamgbose asserts that Nigerian English emerged as a result of “contact between English and Nigerian languages in the socio-cultural and political situation” (9). Thus, Nigerian English is “fundamentally the English usage of Nigerians in its totality, and ...distinct from Standard British English” (Jowitt 47). Certain features make Nigerian English distinct these according to Bamgbose are: linguistic aspect, which includes removal of English vowels and consonants and replacement of such with what appears near to it in any Nigerian language; the pragmatic aspect which is the rule governing the typical usage of English in original situations can be modified to suite the culture and environment where it finds itself; and the creative aspect this concerns how language is been manipulated in the speech context to reflect Nigerian sociocultural situations and experiences. It also reflects in euphemism, kinship terms, greetings, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and transfer Features etc. (13).

Furthermore, although several scholars have continued to argue that Nigerian English bereft the standard that qualifies it for a language but Achebe



refutes such arguments by asserting that Nigerian English is “a language belonging to Nigeria but still in communion with its ancestral home (England)... altered to suit its new African surrounding” (qtd in Onwukwe n. pag.). The creativity of Nigerians in such arts as prose, poetry, music, drama, lay credence to the above assertion. Thus, it is safe to contend that Nigerian English is enriched with some certain characteristics that set it apart from all other Englishes. These features are commonly found at the level of levels of phonetics and phonology, syntax, lexis and semantics etc. Nigeria is one of the major countries where English language has become an inseparable part of the people. In view of its distinctiveness, Nigerian English stands out among the comity of other Englishes around world.

Pragmatically, the use of Nigerian English gives meanings to words beyond what they originally meant in the Standard British English usage. For an example, many lexical items have special meanings ascribed to them by Nigerian users of English different what they are known to be in the nativised tongues (Bamgbose 74). This phenomenon of context has made the English spoken in Nigeria to have been expanded beyond their original meaning. Similarly, some cultural factors have also

helped in modifying the general guiding the use of English in Nigeria.

In view of Odumuh’s theory of linguistic variation, where there is contact situations in language as evidenced in Nigeria, new varieties of such a language are bound to occur that would be different from the mother tongue of the language. This notwithstanding, there is a need for standardization, as well as local acceptability vis-à-vis international intelligibility. Further to this, Odumuh believes that Nigerian English be subdivided into three dialects as a result of the linguistic forces of the three major Nigeria languages. These are sub-Englishes as influenced by Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, languages that have continued to serve as feeder languages to the major super-ordinate Nigerian English (Odumuh n. pag.).

#### **d. Factors Responsible for Lexical Creativity of English Language Usage in Nigeria**

Some factors have been observed to be responsible for lexical creativity within Nigerian English. These, according to Nwachukwu (cited in Onwukwe n. pag.), include:

- i. Level of Education and Environment:** The level one attains educational wise to a great extent, determines their speech

competence. It is no gain saying that a graduate will do better in speech than primary school pupil. The grammar effectiveness of a native speaker will in no small measure be better than that of those who use English as a second language. In the same way, urban dwellers would speak better English than rural dwellers.

**ii. Background:** Lexical creation can also be greatly influenced by experiences one has in life. Where one comes from always reflects in his speech and writing. For instance it is very easy to classify Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba in given a group when they take turns to speak.

**iii. Culture:** The culture of every society plays a role in the lexical creation or morphological processes of language speakers within it. This is as a society has the power to pattern behaviors in some unique ways. In Nigeria, all these factors come to play in shaping her form of English. For instance, culturally, the Nigerian socio-political past as evident in British colonization, for one, left boulders and artefacts of British culture behind. As such an educated Nigerian always appear bilingual and bicultural.

## 2. Discussion: Lexical Creativities in Nigerian English

In view of the discussion for this paper, the following subheadings have been carefully highlighted to reflect some lexical creativities in the usage of Nigerian English as garnered from the selected students:

**a. Loan Words:** These include words borrowed into Nigerian English from other languages, most often as may be imported from Nigerian indigenous languages to Nigerian English communication context. This is as a result of the fact that many of such terms have no English exactitudes. From the discussion of the students, the following loan words are examples of Nigerian English were highlighted: “akara”, “agbada” “tuwo”, “garri”, “amala”, ‘eba’ ‘kunu’ ‘achicha’, etc. Nigerians in a bid to communicate would use any of these words and others without bothering for the need to look for what they mean in native English.

b. **Neologism:** Otherwise known as coinage, this is a morphological process by which words are formed for what does not have an existing name. In the course of the students discussion the following coined words were frequently used: chewing-stick, head-tie, flowing-gown etc. One of the students also said her friend is “carrying sugar-daddy” which by implication means she is dating an older man. Sugar daddy a Nigerian coinage for a man that is dating a very young unmarried lady.

c. **Semantic Shift:** This is a case where there is conscious or unconscious shift from the original meaning(s) of word(s). The students when discussing creatively came up with these lexical creations of semantic shift: ‘Xerox’ is a noun, a brand name for a photocopier, but it has got some semantic shift to function as verb for an act of photocopying documents or

writing in a manner faster than the ordinary. So it is common to hear ‘He Xeroxed the document’ within Nigerian linguistic context. Similarly one of the students said “Hauwa, please flit the room” (meaning to spray it with insecticide). Also “tip-ex an error” in a document was used by one of the students to meaning to cover an error with a correction fluid.

d. **Broadening of Meaning of Words:** Another lexical creation in Nigerian linguistic context concerns the extension of meanings of words. While discussing the word, “customer” which means buyer to a native speaker of English was used by one of the participants when he was actually referring to a seller of garri that failed to deliver garri to her a day before.

e. **Idiomatic Expressions:** Nigerian English speakers, as to achieve its purpose of cultural relativity, have modified some of their

idioms to suite English. In the course of the students' discussion, one of the students in accusing her course mate of sorting her examinations said the accused "used bottom power" in order to pass which ordinarily means she used a sexual or an unscrupulous means to pass her examination. Other examples that cropped up in the course of their discussion are: "A tree does not make a forest" which in native speaker English means that one swallow cannot make a summer; "Don't put sand in my garri" which means do not destroy my chances.

- f. **Semantic Variation:** This is another form of lexical creation relative to Nigerian English. Most often, Nigerian English feature lexical items that their meanings are different from what it is in British English. Thus in the course of the discussion a student said: "The 'waterproof' the man

gave me is not good." Waterproof here simply means a "cellophane bag" in British English. It is waterproof in Nigerian context since they see that it cannot be penetrated by water especially when used to store something that can be destroyed by water. One of the students also said "my sponsor" when he meant is his "benefactor"; another said "my tight friend" instead of "my close friend".

g. **Morphological Variation:**

Morphological variation is a way by which lexical items are created in Nigerian English through domesticated invention of meanings: "pepper-soup" a hot peppery soup made of meat or fish; "academician" refers to a scholar, etcetera.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presented a pragmatic analysis of lexical creativity in the use of Nigerian English. This was to analyze how creative Nigerians can be in the use of English from the pragmatic perspective. The paper contended that lexical items as

used in Nigerian English as may be in variant to standard British English are most often not mistakes nor error but rather a restructuring of language that helps in tailoring English language to sociocultural context of Nigeria. It has therefore been upheld by this study that one of the inherent features of Nigerian English is how apt users are in creating words based on their socio-cultural context. It is also observed that lexical creativity in Nigerian English is brought about by both conscious and unconscious efforts towards achieving a communicative goal. The distinction between the British standard of English or other Englishes and what we have in Nigeria today is as a result of the fact that the Nigerian users of English have expanded the linguistic forms and features of English spoken in Nigeria. Hence, as the focus of pragmatics, the study of language from the perspective of users gives a precise front for the study of English language in view of Nigerian users choices in whatever context of communication. Today, English language in Nigeria has been able to roll along with the culture hence becomes domesticated and nativised. However, further researches should be carried out as to substantiate the claims herein or otherwise dispel it.

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