

Pronunciation of English Words in Nigerian Comedy Movies: A Means of Identity Marking and Humour Creation

By

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Abstract

Evidence abounds in the literature that pronunciation provides clues about speaker's ethnic, social, educational, or occupational identity; ideology; or attitude etc. This paper on English pronunciation in Nigerian comedy movies seeks to investigate the extent movies characters' pronunciation of English words reveals the characters' ethnic identity as well as create humour among the audience. For the study, four Nigerian comedy movies were randomly selected, and data collected by playing the videos and listening to the pronunciation of English words as used by the characters. Ten adults, five males and five females were interviewed to ascertain the acceptability and patronage of the movies by the audience. For our analysis, the pronunciation of the words by the characters were

phonetically transcribed and matched with the Standard English pronunciation. The words whose pronunciation did not match the Standard English were identified and aligned with the basic sound systems of some Nigerian languages, to be able to trace the ethnic identity of the characters. Our findings show that the way most of the characters in the comedy movies pronounce the English words was either borne out of their mother tongue influence. We discovered that the characters' pronunciation was also influenced by their desire to create humour in order to entertain their audience, since entertainment is basic to comedy. Our respondents agree that humour enhances acceptability/patronage of the comedy movies. We recommend research into the aspect of identifying characters' identity through pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax etc.

Key words: comedy, movies, identity, English pronunciation, humour

Introduction

Language plays a very important role in defining or describing the identity of a person. It not only expresses identities but also constructs them. The two phenomena are closely related. As Evans (2014) rightly says, "Language and identity are so closely related that words themselves are inscribed with ideological meaning". This means that ideology itself is part of the determinant factors of how people pronounce English words, which in turn reveals their identity. It is observed that mother-tongue accent interferes in people's English pronunciation, owing to some factors as ethnic group, social or educational background, attitude or ideology as mentioned earlier.

Pronunciation and accent indicate cultural,

religion and ethnic affiliations on an intimate and often unconscious level Scarpace, D. (2011). Many native speakers whose English is not their mother tongue tend to introduce their mother tongue-like accent into English pronunciation. Owing to different phonological system between their language and English, such problem exists. Listening to a dialogue by different people, our interpretation of their identities will most probably be influenced by their pronunciation; their voices, accents and other features of how they speak. Pronunciation is the way in which a word or a language is spoken. According to Grunwel, P.(1993), pronunciation involves the generally agreed-upon sequences of sounds used in speaking a given word or language in a specific dialect (correct pronunciation) or simply the way a particular individual speaks a word or language. But with close examination of the concept of pronunciation, it is obvious that it is much more than the way words sound. A word can be spoken in different ways by various individuals or groups depending on many factors such as: duration of their childhood exposure, location of their current residence, speech or voice disorder, their ethnic group, their social class or their education even for the purpose of humour creation.

The distinct ways people from different ethnic group and linguistic backgrounds in Nigeria pronounce some English words are pure mark of their identities. Igboanusi (2006) observes that the most striking difference of varieties of Nigerian English(NE) lies in the spoken English. Varieties of English mis/pronunciation (in terms of sound, vocabulary etc) have been identified in Nigeria. Most media and entertainment industries in the country, especially the comedians have adopted that in the bid to create comic effect.

This present investigation therefore seeks to

know the extent characters in the entertainment industries utilize these divergent accents in revealing people's identity as well as creating comic effect. An attempt is also made to see how this has enhanced national unity, language enrichment and career development among Nigerians

Literature Review

An overview of previous research in the areas of pronunciation, humour and identity is presented in order to create a comprehensive understanding of how pronunciation of English words as seen in certain comedy movies aid in marking the speaker's identity and as well create comic effect.

Pronunciation as a matter of fact is the act or manner of speaking a word. According to Lippi- Green (1997), pronunciation refers to the articulation and manner of speaking a language, including phonetic and prosodic features of spoken language. Researches focusing on pronunciation problems of speakers of different Nigerian languages have been carried out by some scholars, and peculiarities in their various English pronunciations identified. The work of Igboanusi (2006) is a good example of such studies. He points out that although there is a lot of uniformity in the spoken English of Nigerians, there is also the need to identify some striking dissimilarities in English pronunciation of these Nigerians from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. As he observed, some Nigerians often claim that they can identify the ethnic origin of a fellow Nigerian based on the specific features of the person's speech. He identified the following features as characterizing particularly the pronunciation of the basilectal and mesolectal speakers of Yoruba English (YE), although as he said, they also occur sporadically in the pronunciation of some educated Yoruba English

(YE) speakers:

The RP /tʃ/ is often realized as /ʃ/, as in shurn for churn, shop for chop etc.

This realization according to him is as a result of MT interference since /tʃ/ does not occur in Yoruba.

/v/ is occasionally realized as /f/ since the former is absent in Yoruba phonology, as in fegetable for vegetable, feanguard for vanguard.

/s/ is sometimes substituted for /z/, as in sip for zip, sink for zinc, zize for size etc.

/h/ rarely occurs in Yoruba and so its realization in YE results in two different occurrences- deletion in word initial positions or insertion as a result of hypercorrection. Some of the examples of the deletion of /h/ in word initial positions include: and some for handsome, ouse for house, elp for help etc. Examples of the insertion of /h/ include: heat for eat, hoil for oil, hout for out etc.

There is also the nasalization of pre- nasal vowels in the pronunciation of Yoruba English (YE) as well as the substitution of /j/ for the RP /ʒ/. Igboanusi (2006) also identified that the main specific feature of Igbo English (IE) pronunciation is the alternation between /l/ and /ɾ/ sounds. He added that these accents has been adopted foe comic effect in media and entertainment industries, they also serve as ethnic group marker he said.

Avery and Ehrlich (1992) claim that the sound pattern of the learner's first language transferred into the second language and is likely to cause foreign accents. The mispronunciation of words by native speakers, for them, reflects the influence of the sounds, rules, stress and intonation of their native languages. They maintain that the sound of the native language can influence the learner's pronunciation of a target language in the sense that when there is a sound in the target language which

is not in the learner's native sound inventory or there is a sound in the learner's native language that is not in the sound inventory of the target language, learners may not be able to produce or even perceive the sounds.

Some other studies that have been conducted in the Nigerian context which focus on pronunciation problems of various Nigerian language speakers are: Nkamigbo (2011), Akinjobi (2009), Abubakar (2008), Mohammed (2011) etc. It was identified that Hausa speakers have problem in pronouncing the consonant sound /f/ and /v/. The main reason for the mispronunciation being the mother tongue interference as /f/ and /v/ does not exist in the language. Therefore, Hausa speakers replace them with /p/ and /b/, which are the closest sounds to /f/ and /v/ in terms of place of articulation and voicing. This finding supports the result of Mohammed's (2011) study. It is also in line with Schuh's (2008) description of Hausa consonants which has it that when Hausa speakers have difficulties in pronouncing the English labio-dental fricative /f/ and /v/; they rely on the existing bilabial plosives (stops) /p/ and /b/ in their native language respectively. It is interesting to note that in the process of mother tongue transfer, the speakers according to Schuh maintain consistency in terms of voicing i.e, they substitute the voiceless fricative /f/ with the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/. Similarly, they replace /v/ with /b/ since they are identical in terms of voicing.

Leary & Tangney (2003) define one's ethnic Identity as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity. They see identity as the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person. Erikson (1963) sees identity as encompassing the memories,

experiences, relationships, and values that create one's sense of self. This amalgamation according to him creates a steady sense of which one is over time, even as new facets are developed and incorporated into one's identity. Identity is realizing who we are at personal level and also at community level. To make such identification, one again is able to know his identity as individual. This can be achieved through one's language.

Adetuye, Jegede & Adeniran (2018) define humour as the tendency of a particular cognitive experience to provoke laughter or provide amusement. They also point out that linguistic features such as blending, clipping, collocation clash, sound imitation, exaggeration, code-switching, borrowing, conversion, etc are used in comedy to create humour.

With the descriptions of the above mentioned concepts, the reader of this work stands a better chance to understand the content of this paper very well.

Methodology

Four Nigerian comedy movies were picked at random, the sources being such media outlets as Youtube channels, TV channels, Instagram, Tiktok etc. The videos were played and the pronunciation of English words as used by the characters were listened to and taken down. To ascertain the acceptability and patronage of the movies by the audience, ten adults, five males and five females were interviewed. For our analysis, the pronunciation of the words by the characters were phonetically transcribed and matched with the Standard English pronunciation. The words whose pronunciation did not match with the Standard English were identified and aligned with the basic sound system of some Nigerian languages to trace the ethnic identity of the characters.

Data Presentation

Our data are presented and analysed according to the various channels sourced viz: Jennifa's Diary, Chief Imo Comedy, Professor Johnbull and Naijacomedy#shcool2comedy. Listening to the video clips, the pronunciation peculiarities of each of the characters identified are compared with the already established features of some known ethnic groups in Nigeria, and through that we try to point out the seeming identity of each of the characters. The characters identified in the video clips are: Jennifa, Etuk, Mallam Doya, Chief Imo, Maggi and Abalie.

Data 1: Video Clip from Jennifa's Diary (www.sceneone.tv Advert)

The following mispronounced words by Jennifa (a character) are identified:

Mispronunciation Standard English

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Efribodi/efribodi/ | Every body/evribodi/ |
| 2.TFII/tiifii/ | TV/tiivii/ |
| 3.Woss/wɔ:s/ | Watch/wɔʃ/ |
| 4.Hepisode/hepizod/ | Episode/episɔd/ |
| 5.Jeniva/jeniva/ | Jennifer/dʒenifə(r)/ |
| 6.Mufiis/mufi:s/ | Movies/mu:viz/ |
| 8.Produkson/prodɔksɔn/ | Production/prədʌkʃn/ |
| 9. Happ/ha:p/ | App/a:p/ |
| 10Hivone/haivon/ | Iphone/aifəvɔn/ |
| 11.Hikpad/haikpa:d/ | Ipad/aipæd/ |
| 12.Handroid/handrɔid/ | Android/ændrɔid/ |
| 13.Zev/zɛv/ | Self/self/ |

The outstanding features found in the speeches of the character (Jenifa) above are:

1. Interchange of /f/ and /v/ sounds as in examples 1,2, 5, 6, 10 and 13.
2. Interchange of /s/ and /z/ sounds in some cases, as in examples 4, 6 and 13.

3. Taking of /f/ for /s/ as in example 8, and /p/ for /kp/ as in example 11
4. Outstandingly, /h/ is always deleted at word initial positions and is inserted where a vowel sound begins a word as seen in examples 4, 9, 10, 11, 12.

These align with the words of Igboanusi (2006) about some of the specific features of Yoruba basilect speakers as stated above.

Data 2: Video Clip from Johnbull Season 3 Episode 7 (Campaign Promises)

Mispronounced words from Etuk (a character) are presented below:

| Mispronunciation | Standard English |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 14.Miria/miria/ | Media/mi:diə/ |
| 15.Ofa/ofa/ | Over/əvə(r)/ |
| 16.Do/do/ | To/təv/ |
| 17.Afoid/afoid/ | Avoid/əvɔid/ |
| 18. Ferinead/ferini:d/ | Very neat/veri:ni:t/ |
| 19.Yoins/joins/ | Joints/dʒɔints/ |
| 20.Oud/avd/ | Out/avt/ |
| 21. Diaks force/diaks fɔ:s/ | Tax force/tæks fɔ:s/ |
| 22.Ris/ris/ | This/ðis/ |
| 23.Konsulation/kɔnsɔldeʃɔn/ | Consultation/kɔnslteɪʃn/ |

The outstanding features found in the speeches of the character (Etuk) in the mentioned episode are:

- (i) Taking /r/ for /d/ as in example 14, and also for /ð/ as in example 22
- (ii) Taking /f/ for /v/ as in example 15, 17 and 18

- (iii) Taking /d/ for /t/ as in example 16, 18, 20, 21 and 23
- (iv) Taking /j/ for /dʒ/ as in example 19

These identified peculiarities in the speeches of Etuk as seen in the data above are similar to those identified by Mensah & Mensah (2014) in Efik.

Mai Doya (a character) also has the following words mispronounced in Professor Johnbull's episode:

| Mispronunciation | Standard English |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 24.Por/pɔr/ | For/fə(r)/ |
| 25.Plash/pa:ʃ/ | Flash/flæʃ/ |
| 26.Poruphesa/pɔruΦesa/ | Professor/prəfesə(r)/ |
| 27.Pone/poon/ | Phone/fəʊn/ |
| 28.Ibulu/ibulu/ | Evil/i:vl/ |
| 29.Neba/neba/ | Never/nevə(r) |
| 30.Holigwos/holigwoos/ | Holy ghost/həʊlɪgəʊst/ |

In Mai Doya's speeches, the following specific features are identified:

- (i) Replacement of /f/ sound with /p/ at word initials as found in examples 24, 25 and 27 and with /Φ/ at word initials as in example 26
- (ii) Replacement of /v/ sound with /b/ as in examples 28 and 29
- (iii) Replacement of /g/ sound with /gw/ as in example 30

These identified features in Mia Doya's speeches relate closely with those identified by Keshavarz & Abubakar (2017) in their discussion about pronunciation problems of Hausa speakers of English.

Data 3: Video Clip from Chief Imo Comedy (Imo and Maggi Self Introduction)

The following mispronunciation extracts are gotten from Chief Imo and Maggi in an attempt to introduce themselves to the audience:

31. I want the **audiences** to know you by meeting you...
- 32 ...please can you just **expose us** to your **nomenclature**...
- 33 ...I'm a **nomenclature** by nature...
- 34 ...my name is..., **sistamanggi**...
- 35 ...can you just **in a random of memorandum, memorand your professional professionalism**...
- 36 ...I am an **atros** and a **film make**...
- 37 ...I am **atrocitiy** by nature...
- 38 ...I am so **flamboyant**...
- 39 In the **summary of conclusion**, I am so **intorsticated** by your presence...
- 40 ...we might not like to indulge **into improper fraction**...because of time factors...

The characters here try to show case the manner adopted by most Igbo speakers especially when they want to display illiteracy for the purpose of creating comic effect. This includes coinages, lexical mispronunciations and tautological expressions.

Data4: Video Clip from Naijacomedymedy#school2 comedy

Abalie (a character) in the episode mispronounces the following English words;

- | Mispronunciation | Standard English |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 41 Doti com/dõtıkòm/ | Dot com/dõtçòm/ |
| 42Contilabandi/kõttilabandi/ | Contraband/kõttræbænd/ |
| 43Colonavilus/kolonavilɔ:s/ | Coronavirus/kərəvənəvairə/ |

From the speeches of the character above, it is observed that:

1. Consonant clusters are not allowed as in examples 41 and 42.
2. /l/ sound is used to replace /r/ as in examples 42 and 43.

The Phonetic Sound Systems of Some Nigerian Languages

To trace the identities of the characters in the movies mentioned above, the basic sound systems (consonants) of Igbo, Yoruba, Efik and Hausa are presented. They are compared with the Standard English consonant sounds and the specific features of these languages pointed out based on their speeches in the video clips. Below are the basic sound systems of the mentioned languages

| Place of Articulation | Bilabial | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|---|--------|----------|---------------|---------|-------|---------|---|---|---|---|
| | Labio-dental | | Dental | Alveolar | Post-alveolar | Palatal | Velar | Glottal | | | | |
| Plosive | p | b | | | t | d | | k | g | | | |
| Fricative | | | f | v | θ | ð | s | z | ʃ | ʒ | | h |
| Affricate | | | | | | | tʃ | dʒ | | | | |
| Nasal | | M | | | | | n | | | | ŋ | |
| Lateral Approximant | | | | | | | l | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|---|--|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| Approximant | W | | | | R | J | | |
|-------------|---|--|--|--|---|---|--|--|

Table 1: English Phonetic Consonants
 Source: (Mensah and Mensah 2014: 42)

| Place of Articulation | Manner of Articulation | Bilabial | Alveolar | Post-alveolar | Palatal | Palatized velar | Velar | Labialized velar | Glottal |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------|----------|---------------|---------|-----------------|-------|------------------|---------|
| Plosives & Affricate | | b | t d | tʃ dʒ | | kʲiɡʲ | k g | kʷɡʷ | ʔ |
| Implosive, Ejective Stop & Affricate | | ɓ | ts' d' | (tʃ') | j' | | | | |
| Nasal | | m | n | | | | | | |
| Fricative | | ɸ | s z | | | | | | h |
| Tap/Trill | | | ɾ ɽ | | | | | | |
| Approximant | | w | | | j | | | | |
| Lateral Approximant | | | l | | | | | | |

Table 2: Hausa Phonetic Consonant
 Source: (Sani, 2005)

| Place of Articulation | Manner of Articulation | Bilabial | Labio-dental | | | Palatal | Velar | Alveolar | Post-alveolar | Glottal |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------|--------------|--|--|---------|-------|----------|---------------|---------|
| | | | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-------|---|-----|------|-------|---|
| Plosive | p b | | t d | | | k g | kpgb | kw gw | |
| Nasal | m | | N | | ɲ | ŋ | | ŋw | |
| Fricative | | f v | s z | ʃ | | y | | | h |
| Affricate | | | | tʃ dʒ | | | | | |
| Lateral | | | L | | | | | | |
| Trill | | | R | | | | | | |
| Approximant | | | | | j | | | W | |

Table 2: Igbo Phonetic Consonants
 Source: (Eme and Ubah 2016)

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|----------|--------------|----------|-----------------|---------|-------|--------------|---------|
| Place of Articulation ↓ Manner of Articulation | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Bilabial | Labio-Dental | Alveolar | Palato-alveolar | Palatal | Velar | Labial-velar | Glottal |
| P Plosive | b | | t d | | | | k g | | Kpgb |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|---|-----|---|----|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| Fricative | | f s | | ʃ | | | | | | h |
| Affricate | | | | dʒ | | | | | | |
| Nasal | m | | | | | | | | | |
| Tap | | | r | | | | | | | |
| Lateral | | | l | | | | | | | |
| Approximant | | | | | j | | w | | | |

Table 3: Yoruba Phonetic Consonants
 Source: Eme and Ubah(2016)


| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|---|----------|---------|-------|------------------|---------|
| Place of Articulation |  | | | | | |
| Manner of Articulation | Labial | Alveolar | Palatal | Velar | Labialized Velar | Glottal |
| Plusive | p b | t d | | k | kp | |
| Fricative | f | s | | | | h |
| Nasal | m | n | ɲ | ŋ | ŋw | |
| Trill | | r | | | | |
| Approximant | | l | j | | w | |

Table 4: Efik Phonetic Consonant
 Source: (Mensah and Mensah 2014:41)

Comparison of English Phonetic Consonants with that of Selected Nigerian Languages

| | English | Hausa | Igbo | Yoruba | Efik |
|--|---------|---|---|--|---|
| Total No of Consonants | 24 | 28 | 28 | 17 | 18 |
| Consonants Present in English and also in others | – | (16)/b/,/t/,/d/,/tʃ/,/dʒ/,/k/,/g/,/m/,/n/,/s/,/z/,/h/,/r/,/w/,/l/,/j/ | (21)/p/,/b/,/t/,/d/,/k/,/g/,/m/,/n/,/ŋ/,/f/,/v/,/s/,/z/,/ʒ/,/j/,/ɟ/,/ɟ/ | (15)/b/,/t/,/d/,/k/,/g/,/f/,/s/,/h/,/l/,/dʒ/,/m/,/r/,/j/,/w/ | (15)/p/,/b/,/t/,/d/,/k/,/f/,/s/,/h/,/m/,/n/,/ŋ/,/r/,/l/,/j/,/w/ |
| Consonants Absent in English but found in others | – | (12)/k/,/g/,/kʷ/,/gʷ/,/ʔ/,/β/,/ts/,/dʃ/,/(tʃ)ʷ/,/jʷ/,/Φ/,/ɾ/ | (7)/kp/,/gb/,/kw/,/gw/,/ɲ/,/ɳw/,/ɾ/ | (2)/kp/,/gb/ | (3)/kp/,/ɲ/,/ɳw/ |
| Consonants found in English but not present in others | – | (8) /p/,/f/,/v/,/θ/,/ð/,/z/ | (3) /θ/,/ð/,/z/ | (6)/p/,/v/,/θ/,/ð/,/z/,/f/,/dʒ/,/tʃ/,/z/,/g/ | |

Some sounds in these languages are not found in English phonology, and that suggests the reason for native speakers of these languages mispronounce certain English words that bear those sounds. In the words of Keshavarz & Khamis (2017), “Such sounds are adapted by a process of consonant substitution taking into account closeness of features in an attempt to fill

notable consonantal gaps that will satisfy the requirements of the L2 phonology.”

Findings

We identified the following peculiarities in the languages we worked on from our analysis:

1. In the first data presented, /tʃ/ is often realized as /ʃ/, /v/ as /f/. /v/ is not in the phonology of the language. /s/ is sometimes substituted for /z/. /h/ is rarely seen in the language; it is often deleted at word initials or inserted where vowel sounds begin a word.
2. We noticed in the second data that /v/ is realised as /b/. /p/ is sometimes pronounced as /φ/ and /f/ interchanged with /p/.
3. The second data also reveals a situation where /r/ is taken for /d/, /f/ for /v/, /d/ for /t/ and /j/ for /dʒ/
4. Data three shows mispronunciation in various aspects ranging from sound errors to vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical errors.
5. The last data displays that the character replaces /r/ with /l/.

Conclusion

Pronunciation as a matter of fact gives clue to someone's identity. Often, people from a particular region or ethnic group are marked through the way they pronounce English words. Sometimes words of the English Language are pronounced in a certain manner in order to mimic a people or for the purpose of creating comic effect by comedians. This is actually what this study tries to confirm by selecting some Nigerian comedy movies from four ethnic groups. Listening to

these videos and noting some outstanding peculiarities in the speeches of the characters, the researcher compares these specific features with the basic sound system of the selected languages in order to ascertain the ethnic groups (identity) to which the characters belong.

Our findings show that the characters in the video clips represent the basilectal speakers of their respective languages. They are identified through the peculiarities in their speeches which are also identifiable in the speech patterns of certain Nigerian languages under our study, which have been also confirmed by some authors we have reviewed their work. From our findings, we therefore conclude that the character in data 1 is a Yoruba. Those in data 2 are identified as Efik and Hausa respectively, while those of data 3 are identified as Igbo, and he who spoke in data 4 is equally from Igbo. Their mispronunciations of English words were borne out of their mother tongues as they try to represent the basilectal speakers of their languages and as well create a humorous atmosphere among their audience.

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