

A POLYLECTAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PHONOLOGICAL INTERFERENCE IN YORUBA ENGLISH

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This paper sets out to discuss the factors within the learner and the environment that contribute to faulty speech performance of Yoruba learners of English. In doing this, samples of students' speeches from three major dialect groups within the Yoruba speech community were examined with a view to identifying the ethnic-based realizations of some English sound segments. The three dialect groups are Oyo, Onko and Ekiti.

Attention is focused on the segmental aspects of the phonological problems of Yoruba learners of English looking at some of the sound segments on which earlier contrastive linguists have made several comments. With the polylectal approach used in this work, the paper has identified some errors of generalized statements such as (a) all Yoruba speakers of English, irrespective of their linguistic background, make similar substitutions for the problematic sounds in English (b) the absence of certain sounds in Yoruba always causes problems for Yoruba speakers of English.

This paper has proved that even in the area of bilingual problems on which it concentrates, classical contrastive analysis, based on monolectal comparison, has not been effective enough as a guide to the interference errors because some of the problems predicted never materialize. It is also discovered that it only isolates and petrifies such potential problems without necessary integration and without practical reference to real language learning situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The expansion of the ‘Speech Community’ of the English Language from a local to an international dimension has so changed the character of the language such that it has found its way to Nigeria to assume the status of a second language. As expressed by Fishman (1969), in a second language situation, there is bound to be a bilingual/bicultural and even multicultural association between the two languages in contact. When a learner is faced with another language, he is expected to relate to two languages and two cultures because of the match that exists between languages and socio-cultural context.

English in Nigeria is a second language and as such it has bilingual/bicultural and even multicultural associations and implications for its learning and teaching.

1.2 ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

English, as an imperial language, was introduced to and imposed on the society by the British colonial administration, but today, it has developed to be the language of administration in the country and this status has been responsible for the efforts of many Nigerians to learn the language. Nigeria, to borrow the definition of Fishman, is “a multi-nationality nation” and the individual Nigeria remains a Nigerian because the country is made up of the local Nigerian cultures. Each of the various Nigerian cultures has some languages attached to it and among such languages is Yoruba which is the main language of Oyo, Ogun, Lagos and Ondo States of Nigeria. Speakers of Yoruba are also found in the Kwara State of Nigeria and in the Republics of Benin (formerly Dahomey) and Togo. All these places mentioned form a continuous stretch of land which is an indication that the Yoruba speech community is a large one with several dialectal sub-groups. It should be noted, of course, that within the defunct Western State alone, there were about twenty dialects of Yoruba spoken in places such as Oyo, Ondo, Abeokuta, Ilesa, Ekiti and Ijebu.

In a multi-cultural environment like Nigeria, the learning of any other language is bound to bring about bilingualism because when languages come into contact, there is bound to be some influence of either of the two languages on the other. Such a situation calls for genuine efforts to be directed towards

some more adequate methods by which a Nigerian child could acquire the target language, especially when such a language, by educational and political implications, has become compulsory in all official transactions in the country where it is to be learned. As regards the study of English in Nigeria, a proper distinction between mother-tongue and second language vis-à-vis their roles in the country is desirable. Also, the evolving 'Nigerian English' and its intelligibility on the international level should concern all learners and users of English language.

Both the teacher and the learner of English in this country should be conscious of World Standard English' (WSE) and 'Nigerian English'(NE). The distinction between the two arises from the fact that a Nigerian (and indeed, any learner of a foreign language for that matter), first of all thinks in his mother tongue and in encoding or decoding any message, he forces this thought on the target language, being deviations (in speech) when judged by 'WSE'. The field of study known as contrastive analysis has become a major tool used by linguists in identifying the problem areas of Yoruba learners of English because it is an inter-lingual study interested in the acquisition of languages. Its importance as initially stated by Lado (1957) and later taken up by other linguists is as follows:

The errors and difficulties that occur in the learning and use of a second or foreign language are caused by the interference of the mother-tongue...

The implication of this is that when learning a second or foreign language, an individual already knows his mother-tongue, and it is this which he attempts to transfer.

Latest developments have shown that contrastive analysis has its weaknesses in that it has been highly prescriptive in its approach. For instance, in his own observation, Wilkins (1972:199) maintains that it is not all errors anticipated that are cases of transfer from mother-tongue; some errors may arise from the structure of the target language itself. He further observes that it is not all errors predicted for second language learners that actually occur. From these assertions it could be concluded that it is an over-simplification to say that differences in language structures cause errors while similarities do not. The need for a proper comparison of the two languages involved, (in this case English and Yoruba) is thought necessary to have a more detailed observation of what actually happens when Yoruba people learn and use the English language. We have, therefore, adopted a new method of applying the contrastive analysis approach in this study.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

The fact that a linguist's duty is to provide some account of language in the form of a set of descriptive statements coupled with the belief that no single descriptive statement encapsulates a total description of what happens in language has led to the present study. While we subscribe to the theory and practice of contrastive analysis, we believe that the more descriptive statements there are, the fuller the descriptions become. Linguists like Dunstan (1969), Afolayan (1968) and a host of others, who have worked on the contrastive analysis of Yoruba English, have looked at the two languages as monolectal languages. This study is a step further in that it is a polylectal approach to the study of the problems arising from the comparison of English and Yoruba.

1.4 PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this study is to discuss the factors within the learner and the environment that contribute to faulty speech performance of Yoruba learners of English. One other purpose is to examine samples of students' speeches from three different ethnic groups within the Yoruba speech community with a view to identifying the ethnic based realizations of some English sound segments. This paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

- (i) Is there any relationship between dialect background of learners and the type of phonological errors committed in the process of learning English?
- (ii) What are the ethnic-bound realizations made by students from the three ethnic groups studied?

1.5 DESIGN OF THE PAPER

Data for this study were gathered through the use of a questionnaire containing ethnographic questions and recorded speeches of some forms 1 to 5 students from the three ethnic groups considered for the study.

1.6 SAMPLE

The sample used comprised three groups of students from Oyo, Ondo and Ekiti dialect areas of Oyo and Ondo states respectively. For the purpose of this paper, Oyo dialect area covers towns like Oyo, Ibadan, Ogbomoso, Osogbo, Ede, Gbongan, Ode-Omu, Ikire, Apomu, Ikoyi, Orile-Owu, etc. While the Onko dialect area include towns like Iseyin, Saki, Ilero, Okeho-Iganna, Ago-Are, Septeri, Okaka, Ipapo, Otu, Iwere, Ilua, Igbojaye, Baba-Ode, Komu, etc. The Ekiti dialect area comprises most towns in the Ekiti division such as Ikole, Iyin, Igede, Oye, Ijero, etc. As earlier indicated, the students were selected from forms 1 to 5 of some selected secondary schools in the areas mentioned. 15 students were selected from each of the three groups.

1.7 DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire prepared was set out to elicit information on students' ethnic background and the passage which was read by students for recording on tapes contained selected English sound segments. The sound segments, seven in all, are all consonants because it has been observed that Yoruba students' performances in respect of vowel sounds are similar, irrespective of their dialectal backgrounds. The selected consonant sounds are z, tʃ, ʒ, ʒ, θ, ə, ð and ŋ.

1.8 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The recorded readings were played back and transcribed phonemically. The recordings were later given to some academic colleagues for their own transcriptions and the sets of transcriptions were compared to reflect the true performances of the students. The number of occurrence of each sound tested in the passage was recorded and the number and percentage of correct pronunciations as well as those of deviations were recorded and summarised in tables. The number of occurrences of each sound which was recorded was multiplied by the number of subjects in each dialect group to give the total number of occurrences per dialect group.

2. STUDENTS' SPEECH PERFORMANCE ON EACH OF THE SOUNDS

2.1 SOUND 1: /z/ (90 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

This voiced alveolar fricative is absent in the three Yoruba dialects considered in this study and learners of English have problems with its pronunciation. The only substitution made by students was /s/; the voiceless alveolar fricative and this is common to the three groups. Yoruba students from the Oyo dialect group committed the error 44 times out of 90 instances of occurrence. This represents 48.9% of the total frequency. Students from the Onko dialect group committed the error 63 times or 70% of the total frequency of occurrence while students from the Ekiti dialect group made the same mistake in 46 instances representing 51.5%. The above indicate that most of the students from the Oyo dialect group, who committed the least percentage of error, have perfected themselves in the correct articulation of that sound.

2.2 SOUND 2: /tʃ/ (300 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

This voiceless palato-alveolar affricate is identified as a source of error to Yoruba learners of English in general. Among the students of Oyo dialect group, the first substitution was /ʃ/ - the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative and this was committed in only 48 instances or 16%, which is very insignificant. A major substitution common with students from the Oyo dialect area is /s/ -the voiceless alveolar fricative which was articulated in 252 instances representing 84%.

Students from the Onko dialect group committed the error of substituting /ʃ/ only in 4 instances which is 1.3%. The /s/ substitution error was also committed in only 6 instances. This figure represents 2%. The remaining 290 instances were instances of correct realization which is an indication that they do not have a problem with the sound. It is pertinent, however, to say that during the study, it was discovered that /tʃ/ is ever present in the Onko dialect of the Yoruba language.

The most common realization of /tʃ/ among the Ekiti students was /ʃ/. This was committed in 288 instances out of a total of 300 instances. This represents 96% of the total performance. Only 2 instances were those of /s/ substitution. A conclusion could be drawn from this finding that the Ekiti learners of English would substitute / for /tʃ/ in any environment of its occurrence.

2.3 SOUND 3: /ʃ/ (300 OF OCCURRENCE)

This is the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative which is a source of problem to Yoruba learners of English despite its presence in the Yoruba language.

The substitution of /s/- voiceless alveolar fricative for the sound segment is common with the students of the Oyo dialect group who made the substitution 73 times. This represents 24.3%. Students from the Onko dialect also committed the same error 50 times or 16.7%. Within the Ekiti dialect group there were only 2 instances of the /s/ substitution and this is highly insignificant. From this, it is clear that the Ekitis have no problem with the pronunciation of /ʃ/.

2.4 SOUND 4: /ʒ/ (120 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

The voiced palato-alveolar fricative is totally absent in Yoruba and as such, it constitutes problems to English learners. For the sound, the substitution of /ʃ/ (the voiceless counterpart) was noticed in 25 instances with the Oyo dialect group; 28 instances with the Onko dialect group; out of the total 120 instances of occurrence. These figures represent 20.8% and 23.3% respectively. Among the Ekiti learners, the substitution occurred 94 times or 78.3%.

Another important substitution noticed mostly with students from the Oyo and ondo dialect areas is /j/ - (palatal semi-vowel). From the Oyo dialect group 60 instances of occurrence (i.e. 50%) were recorded while 40 instances (i.e. 33.3%) were recorded for the Ondo dialect group. Only 26 instances or 21.7% were recorded for the Ekiti dialect. There was also an insignificant substitution of /s/ noticed among the Oyo and Ondo students.

2.5 SOUND 5: /θ/ (300 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

This voiceless dental fricative has been confirmed absent in Yoruba language; hence the problem posed to Yoruba learners of English. The substitution of /t/ (voiceless alveolar plosive) is common to the three dialect groups under study. 51 instances (17%) of /t/ were recorded for students from Oyo dialect area while 68 instances (i.e. 22.7%) and 42 instances (14%) were recorded for the Onko and Ekiti students respectively.

One other substitution noticed is /f/- (the voiceless labio-dental fricative) and its realization occurs in word-final positions. Examples of words where this

is realised are *with* and *both*. This /f/ substitution with students from the Oyo and Onko dialect areas. 25 instances of occurrence were recorded for Oyo and 22 instances were for the Onko dialect. There was no significant instance of /f/ substitution among the students from the Ekiti dialect area.

2.6 SOUND 6: /Ḍ/ (300 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

This is the voiced variant of sound 5. The sound is absent in Yoruba and this is responsible for the substitution for it of /d/ (the voiced alveolar plosive).

This /d/ substitution is the only noticeable substitution common to the three dialect groups selected for this study. For instance, out of the 300 total occurrences of the sound in each of the three dialect areas, 190 instances (63.3%) were recorded for Oyo while 243 instances (i.e. 81%) and 188 instances (62.7%) were recorded for Onko and Ekiti dialect areas respectively.

2.7 SOUND 7: /Ḍ/ (120 INSTANCES OF OCCURRENCE)

The absence of this velar nasal is responsible for the substitution of /g/ after /n/ in some environments and /n/ alone in other environments. The /g/ substitution occurs in word medial positions as in words like singing; ringing; while /n/ substitution occurs in word final position. The following figures were recorded for the /g/ substitution; Oyo dialect area, 33 or 27.5%; Onko dialect area also has 33 or 27.5%; while Ekiti dialect areas has 28 instances representing 18/3%. On the other hand, /n/ substitution has the following figures: Oyo dialect area 65 (i.e. 54.2%) Onko, 72 or 60% and Ekiti 50 or 41.7%.

3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

3.1 SOUND 1: /z/

A conclusion that could be drawn from our findings on this sound is that all the speakers, irrespective of their dialectal backgrounds, make similar substitutions for the sound.

3.2 SOUND 2: /tʃ/

The findings on this sound show that the sound segment is not totally absent in Yoruba since it is present in one of the dialects i.e. the Onko dialect. Also the belief that /ʃ/ is the only substitution made for th sound by Yoruba learners is not true. The substitutions made, according to our findings, vary according to dialectal background of learners. (See discussion and figures under students' speech performance on pg. 4).

3.3 SOUND 3: /ʃ/

The findings here show that it is possible at times that a sound segment found present in a source language as well as the target language can still constitute problems to learners. Also the substitutions made for the sound seem to be dialect-based. (See discussion on 2:3).

3.4 SOUND 4: /ʒ/

It is clear here that there are three different substitutions made by Yoruba speakers with /ʒ/ almost being peculiar to Oyo dialect area and (ʒ) to Ekiti dialect area.

3.5 SOUND 5: /θ/

According to our findings, there were two substitutions for this sound each occurring in different environments. (See 2.5) From this conclusion, one could suspect that there could be other substitutions in word final positions.

3.6 SOUND 6: /ð/

The substitution made here was not dialect-based because 71% of the total instances of occurrence was the substitution of /d/ - a voiced alveolar plosive).

3.7 SOUND 7: /ɒ/

Findings here show that there were two noticeable substitutions made for this sound thus /g/ and /n/ and the two occur in different environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has focused attention on the segmental aspects of the phonological problems of Yoruba learners of English by looking at some of the sound segments on which earlier contrastive linguists have made several comments. With the polylectal approach used, the paper has identified some errors of generalized statements such as:

- (i) all Yoruba speakers of English, irrespective of their linguistic background, make similar substitutions for the problematic sounds in English;
- (ii) the absence of certain sounds in Yoruba always causes problems for Yoruba speakers of English.

This paper has again proved that even in the area of bilingual problems on which it concentrates, classical contrastive analysis, based on monolectal comparison, has not been effective enough as a guide to the interference errors. This is simply because it predicts certain problems that never materialize. It also isolates and petrifies such potential problem without necessary integration and without practical reference to real language learning situation. This observation is in tune with what U. Weinreich once pointed out "... But not all potential forms of interference actually materialize. The precise effect of bilingualism on a person's speech varies with a great many other factors, some of which might be called extra-linguistic because they lie beyond the structural differences of the languages, or even the lexical inadequacies:.. Since the learning or teaching of English as a second language is bound to face some problems, and since contrastive analysis, as well as error analysis approaches can go a long way in reducing such learning and teaching problems, it is hereby suggested that further research into the source and target languages should be undertaken, probably, with this type of polylectal approach. A consideration of variables like age, level of education and ethnic background, could help the researcher make an in-depth investigation into the problems of phonological interference.

GLOSSARY

DEFINITION OF TERMS

1. *DIALECT*

This is a sub-division of a language used by a group of people who have some non-linguistic characteristics in common. For instance, if there emerges a distinct form of English used effectively for communication within Nigeria, and which is more or less intelligible to other English-speaking countries; it is a dialect of English as we speak of 'British', 'American' or 'Australian' English.

2. *MONOLECTAL*

This is used to mean a single dialect of a language.

3. *POLYLECTAL*

When a language has many dialects, it is said to be polylectal.

4. *BILINGUAL*

Since a Nigerian child must have had a mother-tongue (e.g. Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, etc.) before learning English, he is regarded as a bilingual; that is he uses or is capable of using two languages alternately.

5. *MOTHER TONGUE*

It is used interchangeably with native or first language to mean any language into which a child is born and brought up, used for his day-to-day activities and expression. (It should be noted that a child of Yoruba parents born and bred in Britain may acquire English as the mother tongue.

6. SECOND LANGUAGE

This term is interchangeable with *Target Language* or *Official Language* which is a language later learnt, usually formally in school, and used for official communications.

NOTES

‘Nationality’ and ‘nation’ are used here in the sense Fishman (1969) uses them in his paper “Nationality-Nationalism and Nation-Nationism” in Fishman J.A. and C.A. Ferguson and J.D. Gupta (eds.) *Language Problems of Developing Nations*. New York, Wiley, pp. 44-45.

APPENDIX

FIG. 1: CONSONANTS OF YORUBA

	Bilabial	Labio dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Palato alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio velar	Labialized Velar	Glottal
Plosive	B			T,d				K,g	Gh kp	(gw)	
Affricate						(tʃ)					
Fricative		F		S		ʃ					h
Nasal	M			N							
Lateral				L							
Approximant or Semi vowel					R		J		W		

NOTE: The above table is adapted from Bolorunduro (1981). *The sounds in bracket are only found in some dialects of Yoruba.

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