Prosodic Variations and Language Attainment in a Multilingual Society

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Abstract: Prosody is considered to be the higher level of language performance. It is a model of human linguistic output in the speaking aspect. Some rhythmic and vocative distributions of human utterance are determined according to some dynamic rules. This paper considers the structures of stress and phrasing in English and a Nigerian language specifically Yoruba language and tries to identify the linguistic properties that really differentiate them. The speech pattern of two languages cannot be the same. The concern therefore is to know the particular points of differences that could generate an acute impediment to student’s proficiency in the use of English as the major official language in Nigeria. The sample for the study consisted of 120 students out of the population of 10870 students of J.S.S class in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Analysis of variance was used to determine the variations among the groups of the local dialects of Yoruba language while t-test was applied to determine the variations that exist between the Received Pronunciation (RP) model of English language and that of Yoruba language. There was a kind of homogeneity among the groups while a remarkable linguistic variation was recorded between the RP and the Local Pronunciation (LP) of English language. It is recommended that more attention must be given to prosody in language teaching programme and procedure over the segmental features.

Key words: Communication competence, loudness, pitch, performance, stress, intonation, utterance

INTRODUCTION

The acute multilingual nature of Nigerian language village is obvious. A language community that contends with more than 680 different local languages (Seibat, 2000) has a serious problem of language integration. There is none of the local languages that are strong enough to be adopted as a national language: the endoglossic language purist may contend with this observation but that is the truth. English language is no more foreign to the natural linguistic terrain in Nigeria and so it must be developed. Students can only realize their potentials in life (as at now) with the tools of the language. The concern now is the poor use of the language which really manifests in the poor performance of the students in the examinations conducted by the West African Examination Council (WAEC, 2007-2009). One doesn’t know the number of students that have been frustrated in life as a result of repeated failures in the test for proficiency in the language. The trends need to be checked.

The nature of the language must be considered, the structure must be studied and the proper nurture must be given to generate in the students and in all the users of the language: good and sharp perception, required level of competence and expected power of performance. Language is the life of man. If an individual fails to acquire the needed tools of the language of communication as used in his environment, he becomes a misfit in such an environment. Prosodic variations that generate negative linguistic perception therefore register very low mutual intelligibility in the communication ability of the speakers who use English as a second language in a multi lingual community like Nigeria.

English language is used at various domains now in Nigeria. The need therefore is paramount for the speakers to perfect his speaking ability of the language in order to be able to operate perfectly in these different domains. English is the official language in Nigeria, the language used in schools, the language of politics, the language of inter-ethnic communication and the only popular language that links Nigeria with the outside world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gimson (1980) considers stress as the prominence given to a certain aspects of human utterances in the course of verbal communication. This prominence could occur on a syllable within a word or on a word within a sentence. This is determined according to the length, height (pitch) and the loudness of an utterance and it is realized within a single pause especially the syllabic stress. This is a distinct peculiar feature of English language. The time-stressed pattern of English speech is
not recognized in most indigenous languages in Nigeria. It is tonal-stream-speech where accent on individual syllable carries meaning and differentiate a segment of speech from the other. As a result of this, learning English as a second language for any Nigerian poses problems especially in the application of stress on syllables and words in the stream of speech in using the tool of the language.

Uche (1998) citing from Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) describes stress as the prominence with which a word, part of a word or of a longer utterance is distinguished from other parts. Correct application of stress makes utterances intelligible. The problem of using the language correctly by an average Nigerian is the inability to apply stress correctly to the level of given prominence to the right speech segment. This problem cannot be waved aside considering the role English language plays in Nigerian language territory. Oyetade (2004) believes that English language has dominated the high domain of language use in Nigeria. Its prominent roles can never be denied. It is preferred by the majority in Nigeria because of its Neutrality. It is the language of education, mass communication, politics, modern religion, science and technology. Proficiency in it changes the speaker’s status and generates better and brighter opportunity in the land. Akindele and Adegbite (2005) say that English language is cherished in Nigerian language community because it is the Language of Wider Communication (LWC).

The language therefore needs to be learnt by all and especially its stress variations, which really affect meaning. Stress patterns can be so significant in English language (Finegan, 2004) therefore; this aspect of linguistics prosody must be well considered in the area of pedagogy as it has to do with learning English as a second language. Amayo (1986) believes that this is the aspect of language teaching that must be first taught because in the model of natural language acquisition by a child, it is not the individual segment (Sound patterns - consonants and vowels) that the child will first learn, master and practise but the rhythm.

Daniel (1992) believes that pragmatics, prosody and of course other non-verbal communications are important components of face-to-face interaction, which are often overlooked, in the language teaching programmes. Music is made lively and enjoyable through coherent prosodic rendition and most of the time a baby is not understood by the accuracy with which he produces the segmental features but by his use of the proper prosodic features.

Stress, rhythm and intonation constitute the supra-segmental features. Stress is one of the notable factors that determine prominence. The concept of prominence describes the status of pitch, quality and quantity of utterance as realized in the different tenors of sounds as it occurs in the stream of speech. According to Gimson, stress is generally considered as an item of focus “upon which there is expended in articulation relatively great effort and muscular energy”. The pitch measures the low and the high intensity of the item pronounced. Quality in stress prominence describes the loudness while the length of loudness in such an item is realized in the quantity therefore, stress application is decided only when the issue of prominence is adequately considered and the outcome produces the right intended semantic output in the use of a language. Stress misapplication therefore in English language, brings distortion to meaning and a break down to mutual intelligibility. Stress indicates emphasis. It changes the word class whether the word is a verb or noun or adjective. In such examples as it is obtainable in disyllabic words like august, comfort, import and rebel, correct application of stress is necessary for good understanding of English as the language of communication.

Statement of the problem: It is a common experience that students in the secondary schools fail English language enmass in the examinations conducted by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO). A close and critical observation reveals that these students find it difficult to communicate freely in the language and this imposes a kind of limitations or restriction on their interpersonal communication with one another in the classroom and in the school community and this is made acute because of the student dialectal background. As a result of their deficiency in speech, reading and writing, the major avenue through which they are tested for the award of certificate of proficiency in the language is negatively affected.

Research question: Do different dialectal backgrounds have negative effects on the students learning of English as a second language?

Research hypothesis: There is no significant difference between the students’ dialectal background and their abilities to perform well in stress and phrasing in English language according to the Received Pronunciation model (RP).

Purpose of the study: The role played by English language as a communication tool in Ekiti State and in Nigeria as a whole makes it so important to look at such language ingredients that can cause negative use of English language. There is no gainsaying that native language has remarkable effects on English language as it is used in Ekiti State. The users of English in Ekiti State learn it as a second language therefore, this study attempts to identify the nature of linguistic variations in the area of
stress and phrasing and point out the effects this can have on English language as it is spoken by speakers of the language in Ekiti State.

**Significance of the study:** The study will identify areas of difficulties in English language especially as it is related to the area of stress and phrasing. Dialectal repertories and idiosyncrasies are explored at the dimension at which such can affect language learning. Teachers of English language will find the outcome of this research useful for better classroom teaching. The findings will equally help, not only the students and the teachers of English, but also all the speakers of English as a second language especially the African audience. Majority of the speakers of English language in the continent of African have this common problem of negative linguistic transfer of mother tongue into their English language speech model.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research design was a case study. The targets are to collect detailed information that can help to analyze the existing language habits, to identify problem or justify current condition and practices and to make comparison and evaluation. The population of the study consists of students in all the Junior Secondary School in Ekiti State with 108,870 students, one hundred and twenty students was selected through stratified random sampling technique.

The sample taken were considered adequate to represent the population because it was carefully selected in order to naturally bring out what constitute variance between a dialect of Yoruba as a language and English language as a global tool of communication. Ekiti State was divided into four zones and a sample of 30 items was taken from each zone.

Achievement Test was used as an instrument to collect data. The test was originally designed and produced by West African Examination Council (WAEC) for the Senior Certificate Examination. It was also a pattern of instrument used by National Teacher Institute (NTI) to discover the proficiency of teachers in training in the use of English language before awarding Teachers’ Grade Two Certificate.

The collection of data through the use of this instrument was personally carried out by the researchers. It was a face-to-face exercise whereby the students read the given passage and instant assessment was made accordingly to the prepared scheme of gradings.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the relationship existing among the groups while t- test was used to actually determine the relationship between Ekiti dialects and the Received Pronunciation model of English language.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The hypothesis raised on the topic of consideration suggests that: there is no significant difference between the students dialectal backgrounds and their abilities to perform well according to the RP model in stress and phrasing in English language.

In Table 1, F-calculated was 2.55 while the F-table was 4.07 in this case, F-table is greater than F-calculated therefore significant difference was not recorded among the groups. The hypothesis was accepted. The story was different in the second table where t-value (71.09) was greater than t-table (1.98). The hypothesis was rejected. There was a significant difference between the dialect of Yoruba and the RP model of English language.

It was discovered through the administration of the instrument used for the study that there was homogeneity in language performance of Ekiti users of English as revealed in Table 1. This means that the dialects of the indigenous language have similar features especially at the level of stress and phrasing.

Table 2 displays the divergent language performances of Ekiti users of English language. The deviation from the universal norms of English language that generates Global Mutual Intelligibility (GMI) was quite significant in the table. This accounts for the poor language performance of the users of English language in the language region.

The hypothesis tests students’ abilities to apply stress correctly on the different syllables. English language loses its semantic essence when stress is wrongly applied. The primary stress effects changes in the grammatical structure of English language. Any wrong application of this brings semantic distortion in the stream of communication in English language. For example the word AUGUST can be used to mean different things in different contents through stress variations. When the stress falls on the first syllable, it refers to the eighth month of the year and it functions as a noun. On the other hand, when the stress falls on the second syllable, it becomes an adjective with entirely different meaning and function. Other example disyllabic words that follow the same trend include: comfort, rebel, import, export, trespass, mandate contract, objective, suspect, minute etc.

Apart from the grammatical function stress effects in English, it also helps to shift emphasis from a word to another word in English language. And this is what is referred to as emphatic stress. Some words naturally receive stress in English language. Words like noun, verb, adjective and adverb receive stress while the likes of preposition articles etc. do not normally receive stress as they occur on the syntagmatic axis. But in the course of laying emphasis for better understanding, any item that occurs on this axis can be focused through the used of stress in the phrasing.

Standard English pronunciation recognizes even timing in the stream of speech as structured in different
Table 1: Test on stress and phrasing among the different dialects of Ekiti

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F-calculated</th>
<th>F-table</th>
<th>L/S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.625</td>
<td>168750</td>
<td>2.5478</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>p&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>768,300</td>
<td>6.6233</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>8189250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decision: There is no significant difference among the groups

Table 2: Test on stress and phrasing between Ekiti dialect and the English Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t-calculated</th>
<th>t-table</th>
<th>L/S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba dialect</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2.9750</td>
<td>2.623</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>71.07</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>P&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RP</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decision: Reject H₀, There is significant difference

phrases that form the body of human speech. This is calculated in arriving at the prominence as we consider different occurrences of stress: word, sentence, grammatical and emphatic stresses. The note of prominence as one considers the item that receives stress take into consideration the following:

- Loudness of the sound
- Pitch (height) of the sound
- Length of time taken to realize the sound

The regression equation of a kind can be framed as:

\[
\text{Stress} = \text{Prominence} + \text{Loudness} + \text{Pitch} + \text{Length}
\]

where;

- Y = stress
- A = prominence
- X1 = loudness
- X2 = pitch
- X3 = length

Therefore prominence, the emblem of stress remains constant: it is used to determine the item that receives stress in the stream of speech.

The test carried out among the groups (Ijesa dialect, Moba dialect and Ekiti central dialect of Yoruba language in Nigeria, showed no significant difference among the groups but significant difference was recorded between the Received Pronunciation (the standard form of English language) and the users of the language in Ekiti State. Yoruba language in all its forms is realized in a tonal pattern as against the time stressed pattern of English language. This may account for the poor performance of the students in English language. Majority could hardly communicate meaningfully in the language.

The limitation in the speaking skills generates communication phobia in the language. This affects other language skills (listening, reading and writing) negatively. The end result is annual mass failure not only in English language but also in all other vital school subjects. There is also a gross denial for an individual in Nigerian society who is deficient in the use of English. Such is liable to participate in politics and other vital sectors in the society.

**CONCLUSION**

It is true that there is a common core in language spoken by man. The components of phonology syntax and semantics share similar structures in all spoken language in human society. This not withstanding, each language is unique. Languages are not the same in all their components. In a bilingual or multilingual society like Nigeria, it is established that the linguistic tool of a language that is first acquired by an individual has effect on the subsequent languages learnt. The effect, in most cases is negative and this was the experience with the subjects in this study. The structure and culture of first language of the students have a negative effect on the students’ use of English. Majority could hardly communicate meaningfully in the language.

English in Nigerian linguistic territory remains the only Language of Wider Communication (LWC). As at present, Nigeria as a nation does not have any viable alternative. Although the endo-glossic language purists may detest this claim but this remains the truth. When this is considered, a better pedagogical approach must be identified. Although the language can be domesticated (Adegbija, 2004) but not to the point of breaking down the global mutual intelligibility of it.

The prosodic features must first be considered in the teaching arsenal as against the present practice of focusing on the segmental features. The pedagogical model of language teaching must follow the natural pattern. A child does not first master the individual segment in his attempt to speak. It is the rhythm and intonation. Language teaching calls for experts and well trained persons in the art. Teachers that can serve as models are needed.

It is also suggested that speech must be made a separate subject. It must be made practical in all its teaching and testing. The present situation whereby the test on oral by the various examination bodies is reduced to theory as carried out in object test should stop. There is no way you can test proficiency in speech through book. It must be made one hundred percent practical. If this will be made possible, necessary tools must be put in place.

**RECOMMENDATION**

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language laboratory in schools must be well equipped and trained personnel must be provided with handsome captivating remunerations.

REFERENCES


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