



A semantico: Syntactic shift of thirteen English words: The Nigerian context

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Abstract

The paper examines thirteen English words whose meanings and usages have been shifted in Nigeria from their etymologically known forms. Using the semantico-syntactic paradigm, the words were purposively selected and descriptively or qualitatively analyzed, showing their new usages, classes and their standard forms. The paper in form of advocacy held that language - which is characteristically dynamic, always accounts for mutual intelligibility among its immediate users and is better defined pragmatically from the users' context.

Keywords: semantics, syntax, lexis, shift, expansion, dynamism, variation

1. Introduction

The words of every language belongs to a particular word class and have sense or semantic references (cf. Nwala, 2004; 2015 and Nwala & Obisike 2014) ^[8, 9, 10]. The class membership of words and their meanings are listed very clearly in the lexicon. (Ndimele, 1997). The class membership and the meanings of words are what both language acquirers and learners come to terms with that enable them use the language and be able to participate in the linguistic comity of the language. However, language as globally acclaimed is geographically/regionally defined. Language is highly dynamic, it changes from time to time and from people to people, hence, we talk about idiolect, sociolect, register and dialect. Historically, many languages that were once dialects of a language, called an ancestral language - a proto form which is no longer in existence, have lost their mutual intelligibility because of time and space. The Endo-European languages and Congo-Benue Phylum are good examples of language change and evolution. The change in dialects of a language, which involves lexis, phonology, semantics and grammar and which makes such dialects become distinct languages is usually, gradual and linguistically unplanned.

The English language is a glaring example of a language that has witnessed and is still witnessing linguistic changes. It has historically undergone different changes, hence, we have the Ancient English, the Medieval English and the Modern English (Millar, R. 2007; Akata, S. O. 2006) ^[7, 11]. Even in this era of Modern English, we have the American English, the Canadian English, the British English, and the Nigerian English among others. These Englishes or better still, varieties of English have their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. This informs why words such as *gaol*, *luggage*, *teenger* in the British language are called *jail*, *baggage*, *teen* in the American English. The Nigerian English is one of the world's Englishes that is characteristically peculiar to Nigerians. The lexis and the grammar (phonology and semantics inclusive) of the Nigerian English are to a large extent peculiar to the Nigerian context. The words or lexes of the Nigerian English are of the same form (morphology) with other world's Englishes, but their classes and meanings at times

differ. This does not make the Nigerian English less prestigious or inferior to any other type of English as some may feel, but it shows a type of linguistic shift, a step to linguistic adequacy and regional dominance.

2. The Theoretical Framework

This paper is situated within the confines of semantics and syntax (semantico-syntactic) and contrastive analysis. Semantics is the study of the meaning of words and sentences of a language, (Ndimele, 1997). It is the meanings assigned to words that make communication and interaction possible. The meanings of words, together with their forms and classes are specified in the lexicon. This makes the recognition and identification of words and their combination to form larger constructions such as phrases and sentence possible. Syntax which is at the kernel of the grammar of any language is the study of sentence formation. It has rules called syntactic rules that define the order of words, the class membership of words and their possible roles in sentences (Nwala, 2004) ^[8]. So, a semantico-syntactic theory is one that basically shows the meanings and classes of words. The theory also shows constraints or sensitive rules that enhance well-formedness of sentences.

The Contrastive Analysis (CA) is a theory of language learning used to contrast and compare the forms and structures of two or more languages (Lado 1957; Wilkins 1972, Fries 1954) ^[5, 4]. The major tenet of CA which is outside the scope of this paper is L2 learning. According to Konler (1974, p. 83) "the idea behind it is to find a way of predicting those mistakes in pronunciation and sentence construction which foreign learners of a language are likely to make and devise drills to prevent these mistakes from occurring". CA helps to identify the needs of a language learner and guides the facilitator aright.

The theories adopted in this paper are linguistically suitable as they provide information about the meaning of the thirteen words studied in this paper in the Nigerian context, the Standard English, their classes and usages.

3. Conceptual Review

Lexis

Lexis is the study of the ways the vocabulary of a language

is organized. It accounts for the all the words i.e the stock or the totality of meaningful words available for use in a given language (Tamunobelena, 2018) ^[12]. Lexis is generally a term in linguistics which defines a full set of words or the vocabulary of a language.

The lexis or words of a language are contained in the lexicon or dictionary, which shows their meanings, forms and classes. (Nwala, 2015) ^[9]. The words or lexes of a language are divided into two: content words and grammatical words. The content words are meaning bearing words; they are the Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs. The grammatical words (which is also called function words or functors) are words that have little lexical meanings or have ambiguous meanings and express grammatical relationships among words within a sentence. They are the Prepositions, Conjunctions, Interjections and Pronouns.

Semantics

This is simply the branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of words and sentences. In the words of Lyon (1981) ^[6] semantics is the study meaning, while Crystal (1984) sees it as the study of linguistics form. In a similar opinion, Nwala (2015) ^[9] defines semantics as the study of meaning and interpretation, which promotes communication- which is a byproduct of phonology and grammar at the interpretation and communication level.

The foregoing simply means that semantic is the study of the meaning of lexes either content or function words. The meaning of every word of a language is contained or specified in the lexicon. The meaning of lexes or words may be literal or denotative, thematic and associative (Nwala, 2015) ^[9]. A language can also witness semantic variation, such as transfer, analogy, acronyms, semantic shift or extension, coinage and even narrowing, all these show language dynamism.

Syntax

The syntax of any language shows the rules for the well-formedness of larger constructions. Syntax is popularly defined as the study of sentence formation (Nwala, 2015; Tamunobelega 2018) ^[9, 12]. Syntax studies the categories or classes of words and specifies how they are to be arranged in constructions. For instance, through the syntax of the English language, we know that the phrase “*the beautiful women*” is well-formed while “*the women beautiful*” is ill-formed. From the foregoing, syntax is seen both as a study and set of rules and principles. As a study, it defines how lexes are combined; as set of rules, it shows the principles popularly called syntactic rules.

4. Methodology

Because of the nature of this paper, we adopted the descriptive or the qualitative research design. The descriptive method is the type that describes a phenomenon or data the way it is without any form of massaging or mining. The population of the paper as we hinted earlier is thirteen lexical items, which we purposively sampled from the stocks of English lexicon. We adopted the descriptive design because with it, we freely analysed and described our data

5. Analysis

Here, we present the thirteen selected English lexes,

showing their meanings and usages both in the Nigerian context and the British (Standard) context.

Lexis:	Class (es)
1. Several	Adverb
a. Nigerian Meaning:	many times
Usage:	I have warned you severally b.
b. Standard Meaning:	Separately
Usage:	Joy and John did the task jointly, not severally
2. Plump	Adjective
a. Nigeria Meaning:	Beautiful
Usage:	She is plumpy (not plump); she is beautiful
b. Standard Meaning:	Soft, slightly fat, round body
Usage:	She is a plump girl.
3. Fart	Verb, Noun
a. Nigerian Meaning:	Mess, pollute.
Usage:	She has messed or polluted
b. Standard Meaning:	verb: To release or let air from the bowels or anus
Noun:	An act of letting air out
4. Deliver	Verb
a. Nigerian Meaning:	To give birth
Usage:	Ngozi has delivered a baby girl
b. Standard Meaning:	To release, to assist a woman in child birth
Usage:	Ngozi has been delivered of a baby girl.
5. Conclusively:	Adverb
a. Nigerian Meaning:	To end.
Usage:	Conclusively, she can only succeed through me
b. Standard Meaning:	Convincing.
Usage:	He has proved his case so conclusively
6. Insulting:	Adjective
a. Nigerian Meaning:	offend, abuse, let down
Usage:	He is very insulting; yours position is insulting.
b. Standard Meaning:	To cause someone feel bad or offended
Usage:	your position is insulting.
7. Naked:	Adjective
a. Nigerian Meaning:	to make somebody naked (used as a verb).
Usage:	He naked the girl
b. Standard Meaning:	bare; not wearing clothes
Usage:	He came naked
8. Talkative:	Adjective
a. Nigerian Meaning:	ones attribute or character (used as a nouns).
Usage:	John is a talkative
b. Standard Meaning:	Talks a lot.
Usage:	John is a talkative boy; He is very talkative

9. Pregnant: Adjective
 a. Nigerian Meaning: To cause a women be pregnant (used as a verb).
 Usage: He pregnanted her; John pregnanted his girlfriend.
 b. Standard Meaning: (of a woman) to have a baby developing inside her.
 Usage: He got the woman pregnant; John got his girlfriend pregnant
10. Malice: Noun
 a. Nigerian Meaning: To avoid talking to each other or one another
 Usage: We are keeping malice
 b. Standard Meaning: ill-will; a feeling of hatred for someone that causes a harm
11. Likeness: Noun
 a. Nigerian Meaning: love, appreciation
 Usage: I welcomed you because of the likeness I have for you.
 b. Standard Meaning: image, same or similar.
 Usage: He created us in his own likeness
12. Academician Adjective
 a. Nigerian Meaning: A great scholar; teacher
 Usage: Dr. Nwala is an academician
 b. Standard Meaning: An official organization that encourages and develops art, science and literature.
 Usage: He is an academician.
13. Borrow: Verb
 a. Nigerian Meaning: To give or ask for someone's item.
 Usage: John borrow me phone
 b. Standard Meaning: To take; obtain someone's thing
 Usage: Please can I borrow your book; John borrowed some money from Joy.

The data clearly show interesting linguistic variations or differences between the English in Nigerian context and the Standard or British English. Morphologically, the forms of the lexical items are similar but semantically, they are either narrowed, shifted, or expanded. For instance, the word *several* is used in the Nigerian context to mean *many times* but it is used to mean something completely different in the Standard usage. It is used to mean a *separate* or *different* situation, hence, it could be said, *we went there severally* (we went there separately) - an expression that will be hard to hear, say, or understand in the Nigerian context. Similarly, in examples 7 and 8, we notice a radical difference in the usages and meanings of the word *naked* and *talkative* in both varieties. It is rare to hear a typical Nigerian English user to say, *she was made to dance naked*; or *she came almost naked*, where the word *naked* is used as adjective; rather one would always hear such expressions as *he naked her in the public*; *please go ahead and naked her* etc. For the lexical item *talkative*, an adjective, but used as a noun in the Nigerian context, such expression as *John is a talkative*; *the girl is a talkative* instead of *John is a talkative person* and *the girl is a talkative person* are common place. In some other words such as *fart*, *deliver*, *malice*, *pregnant*,

conclusively, *borrow*, *deliver* among others, we notice a sort semantic expansion. The broad ideas or meanings of the words as used in the Standard English are conceivable in their Nigeria usages. The difference here is that the words have regional meanings used to describe the Nigerian context, perceptions and experiences of the people. In words such as *plump* and *insulting*, we observe some forms of semantic enlargement or shift. The word *plump* is generally called *plumpy* to represent *beautiful* while *insulting* is *insultive* used to mean *offend*, *abuse* or *let down*. The meanings of the words in the Nigerian context are not radically different from those of the Standard English. It is as it were, a linguistic situation associated with the dynamic nature of language.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the lexical variation or semantico-syntactic variation of the Nigerian variety of the English language. It has shown in clear forms that language is not a static phenomenon; it is dynamic and region-specific. The lexical items of the English language studied from the Nigerian context showed some linguistic nuances, replica of semantic and syntactic shift, expansion and narrowing. What is obtainable is no form of linguistic aberration but a common sociolinguistic phenomenon called relativism - which sees language to be an integral part of the social environment, one that lives with the people; one that is conditioned by the people and one that is defined by the people.

7. References

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