

## The effect of the rising tone on the meaning of “Now” and “Ehen” in Nigerian Spoken English

Ado A Jacob

Department of English, Girls High School, Gindiri, Mangu, Plateau State, Nigeria

### Abstract

Nigerian English is one among the numerous existing varieties of English around the world. It has been observed to possess specific peculiarities in the use of intonation, and in other aspects of English Language like semantics and grammar. It differs significantly from the RP variety with the obvious disparity in the use of the rising tone and the meanings associated with it. This is a study to show the connection between tone use and semantics. English words may have the same or slightly different meanings all around the world but it is obvious that meanings could vary even with the choice of tone - rising or falling. In this study, spontaneous speeches of thirty Nigerians were collected over a period of five years. The subjects included those who have completed their secondary school, university graduates, lecturers and professionals from various fields. Part of the data was collected from the statements of actors on Nigerian movies. The speeches of few elementary school students who are believed to come from well-to-do homes, have educated parents and attend good schools were also analysed. At the end of the study, the result shows that “now” has different meanings in Nigerian Spoken English. When it is said with a rising tone, the meaning does not always indicate time. ‘Ehen’ is not an English word but when said with a rising tone, its meaning is close to that of the rising ‘now’ (when not indication time). Sometimes, the two words co-occur in the same sentence.

**Keywords:** rising, tone, Ehen, obvious disparity

### 1. Introduction

A lot of words used in everyday conversation in Nigeria have developed into what may be referred to as Nigerian English (standard or nonstandard). Such words include *now* and *ehen*. *Now* is obviously an English word which means *at present* or *this very moment* – a reference to time. *Ehen* on the other hand may be a loan word from some African language(s). It is largely used in pidgin communication, but recently it could be heard in the expressions of university students and lecturers in formal and informal conversations. That has arguably given it a status considerably equal to that of other English words used in Nigeria by Nigerians. This paper x-rays the Nigerian uses of *now*, especially when it is said with the rising tone; and the semantic, pragmatic, and tone relationship between *now*, and *ehen*. This paper reveals that the use of *now* in Nigerian English goes beyond its lexical meaning. It could have several meanings that do not refer to time in any way, contrary to its use in British English. The essence of this research is to sensitise users of *now* and *ehen* about the communicative problem it could pose in international communication, and to notify the academic group on the growing use of the words for cautioning or encouragement. It is important to not however that it is subconsciously used in spoken English. That is probably why it rarely reflects in writing.

### 2. The Concept and Use of Intonations

As far back as the 1960s, the works of scholars such as O’Connor and Arnold have shown that in English, intonation can be used to express different attitudes: friendliness, politeness, excitement, sarcasm, anger, disapproval etc. Individuals from different linguistic communities use tones differently. The rising tone and the falling tone in English may be used differently in different English speaking communities to achieve specific meanings. Where the rising tone is used in a

statement to indicate surprise, in a different community, a falling tone may just be suitable. For example;

You really made this beautiful *↗*dress.  
 You really made this beautiful *↘*dress.

The use of the rising and falling tones in the above sentences tends to show that there is no universal agreement in the use of the English tones around the world. The variation becomes a vital research item because it is needed to, in a way, reconcile the various ways tones are used to make inter-community communication realizable.

Roach (154) points out that the Mandarin Chinese use intonation differently compared to English. This is because Chinese is a tonal language. In English, *yes* said with either a rise, a fall or a level tone may not have very significant difference in meaning. But in Mandarin Chinese *ma* with a level tone means *mother*; with a rising tone, it means *hemp* and with a falling tone, it means *scold*. This is a major characteristic generally of tone languages, and these are very common in Africa. Despite claims to the contrary, English is not a tone but an intonational language, and tone functions differently in such languages from the way it functions in tone languages.

Eka says that “Intonation is a major source of meaning variation in English” (83). O’Connor and Arnold say that intonation affects speech in various ways. In its contribution to meaning, it indicates punctuation in long stretched utterances. They add that utterances which differ only based on intonation may well differ in meaning. On this reason, they consider intonation as significant in communication (1). They say that intonation is systematic in that it is not a random process and is “therefore possible to describe frequently recurring patterns of pitch and to give rules for their use”. The pitch patterns of English are not necessarily the same in form as those of other languages, and

they may not produce the same effect as they would in other languages. The variety in their use may result in communication problems. *Thank you* may sound genuine using a particular tone, and casual on a different tone (2).

### 3. What is Tone?

Tone is a part of speech activity. It refers to the distinctive type of sound produced during a conversation including fluctuation of pitch. In analysing poetry for instance, tone plays a vital role in that it helps the reader to decipher the persona’s mood. Words are said with certain tonal property to reveal certain attitudinal reality. That is why it becomes necessary to analyse a person’s use of tone during communication. Communication is more effective when tone forms a major part of what determines the meaning of an utterance. Though facial expression undoubtedly contributes to the meaning of an utterance, a hearer may not see the face of the speaker, and the speaker may decide to put on a countenance that does not correspond to the tone used, maybe just to be polite.

The disparity in the use of tones between syllable timed languages and stress timed languages is an important aspect of this discussion. The syllable timed languages, also called tone languages are so called because words are differentiated with the use of tones; for instance *obe* (Yoruba) when said with the primary stress on the first syllable refers to soup, whereas when the second syllable carries the primary stress, it refers to knife. A non-tone language like English operates differently in the sense that tones may be used to express attitude but not to give a completely different meaning to a word. For instance *to'day* and *to/day* are said with different tones but the meaning remains the same. The first one has a rise on the second syllable making it sound like a question, and the second one has a falling tone

### 4. The Use of the Rising Tones

Quirk and Greenbaum (455) observe that the rising tone is the commonest tone after the falling tone. Their opinion on the use of the rising tone concurs with that of Eka (93) who observes that the rising tone has its usefulness in communication. It signals nonfinality or that a statement has unspecified implication which Elugbe (176) refers to as incomplete statement. It is used at the end of yes/no questions. He uses the following examples to illustrate these claims.

1. I wanted to buy a /racket, my son needed to buy a \shirt.
2. Peter got on a /bus, Alice went by \sea.

Elugbe says that it could be used for polite requests/encouragement. One can say; “May I use your pen, /please?” He says that yes/no questions tend to have tags that are said with rising tone, that the tag should continue to rise from the end of the question.

You are not sure. /Are you?

He says that the rising tone is used to encourage a person or to give assurance.

1. Come /on, go /on
2. Relax: I won't /hurt you.

i). can be used for a person faced with a difficult task and is about to give up. The person is urged to continue. (ii) can be used by someone who appears dangerous to someone who is scared.

### 5. Falling Tones

Although this research centres on the rising tone, it is important that we examine other tone types because of the interwoven application of tones across various varieties of English which forms part of the reason for this study. The generally recognized faults have always been that certain speakers use the rising tone where the falling tone should be or vice versa.

According to Gimson, these tones involve a glide that starts from the highest pitch of the speaking voice and falls to the lowest pitch. They are marked (ˆ) for high fall and (ˊ) for low fall. The fall is more noticeable when it occurs on a syllable that is a long vowel, diphthong or voiced consonant.

\No He ˊcouldn't be \seen. He was \running.

It is used in declarative statements, which he calls declarative falling tones. The high fall expresses more liveliness and involvement than the low fall. Cruttenden (91) says that the two falling tones, low-fall and high-fall “involve a sense of finality, of completeness, definiteness, and separateness when used with declaratives...” He notes regarding British English that the low-fall is normally more uninteresting, unexciting, and dispassionate whereas the high-fall is more interesting, exciting, and more involved. However this may not be the case in Nigerian English.

It's a very nice \garden.  
Of \course it is.  
It is a very dull \book.  
The parcel arrives on \Thursday.

Elugbe (175) says that a typical falling tone is usually the one that will be used in answering a *yes* or *no* question like

A: Is your name Moses?  
B: \yes.

He says that the falling tone is used for statements, commands and wh-questions. He adds that when commands are said using the falling tone, they are not intended to be polite. The commands may not be said angrily, but they leave no option to the person being commanded.

This is your house. (Statement)



Come in and sit down. (Command)



What is your name? (Question)



In addition, he says that sometimes a falling tone utterance is followed by a tag as in *Get out quickly, he said angrily*, where the second part of the statement is the tag. The first part of the statement is said with a falling tone.

### 6. The Rising “Now”

Now is a common word in English, but it has been made even more common with additional meanings it as acquired in PNE. The extra meanings have originally been a feature more prevalent among uneducated Nigerians. However, it has become a more widely accepted expression even among the educated Nigerians. It has gradually metamorphosed from pidgin to a level where it could feature in ‘Standard Nigerian English’.

The word in question is known to be an adverb even though Bas Aarts and others have put up an argument that it is a preposition. Whether or not it is an adjective or preposition is not the area of interest in this discussion, but that the meaning of the word *now* is related to the concept of time. For example;

1. I will have my meal *now*.
2. Do we go *now*?

In BE either of the above expressions may be said using the rising or falling tone on the last word to refer to time (the immediate present). However, in Nigeria, it depends on the intended meaning or the attitude of the speaker. Using a rising tone in (i) could mean that the speaker is in a good mood, or an expression like *...then I will have my bath* may follow so that the fall is transferred to the last added word. (ii), which is a question, would take the rising tone; however, a falling tone may be used to show that the speaker is probably not in such a good mood, probably because he/she has been delayed. It may be followed by *please*, as in *Do we go now, please?* The rise moves from *now* to *please*.

### 7. The PNE “Now”

Although to a large extent, *now* is used the same way it is used in BE, there are patterns of its use that do not conform to the universal patterns. The word is used in other ways which do not really refer to time; and when it is used in such manner, it usually takes a rising tone. For instance a person is asked *will you travel to the village for christmas?* And he responds, *yes now*, to show how confident he is about the positive response or probably saying *you should know it*. The *now* in *yes now* is not to mean that he is travelling right away, but that he will surely travel.

Some examples are:

1. Don’t go *now*.
2. No, *now*.
3. Come *now*. (whether in annoyance or in persuasion, the tone is the same)

Come to me *now*, I will not beat you again. (to a child who was spanked moments ago)

Come *now*, I will leave you if you are not quick (to a person delaying).

Let’s go *now* (expressing discomfort: usually a younger person to an older person he or she cannot scold): *Daddy, let’s go now*.

The above examples reveal that though Nigerians do not efficiently exploit the rising tone like their British counterparts, they exploit it in other ways. And it is important to note also

from the given examples that while the rising tone is most generally concerned with an attitude that cannot really be described as sad or unhappy, we can see here through the rising *now* that in Nigerian English the rising tone can be used to express sadness, happiness or indifference, but to a very limited degree.

Ogbodo, in his *Harvest of Corruption*, uses *now* in a way that does not indicate time. At some point in the book, the conversation would appear to be a mixture of pidgin and Standard English, but the interlocutors are university graduates basically conversing in what would be considered correct English. Also, pidgin expressions in the book are written in italics but these ones are not. These are some of the utterances.

1. Look at me. Where do I belong now? What have I done wrong? (2)
2. Guess now, you sef. (7)
3. I have asked her to come tomorrow. You know now. The job stunt is just a cover up. (13)
4. You may go now till tomorrow. (5)

In i above, the *now* is an indication of frustration. The speaker is complaining to God why she is unable to get a job. In ii the speaker is only urging her friend to make a guess. In iii, the *now* is to indicate assurance. But the *now* in iv actually refers to time.

### 7.1. Expression of Anger/dissatisfaction

A speaker who is angry because he has looked for a person for some time and has not found him or her will ask the rhetorical question *Where is James now?* In fact, this speaker could be really furious. The *now* said in a rising tone marks the speaker’s troubled state of mind. However, in a different situation where the *now* refers to time, the speaker will use a falling tone, and will not necessarily be expressing anger.

1. Where is James *now*? (The last time I asked, he was in Bauchi) or (I want to meet him where he is.)
2. Just do what I said you should do *now*.
3. Stop playing with the food *now*.

(i) above refers to time, while (ii) and (iii) may indicate that the speaker is not pleased with the situation. Yet, in PNE (i) said with a rise at the end is not likely to refer to time, but an expression of emphasis. The rise in this case is usually low-rise. For instance in (i) above, the tone keeps going down from *where*; and the beginning part of *now*, where the rise starts, is the lowest.

Where is James *now*?

/wiə is dʒems nou/



If *now* is used in a statement to refer to time, and the speaker is speaking angrily, he is likely to end the statement with a falling tone. For instance *Come here now* may be a command given in anger.

### 7.2. Persuasive Expression of Dissatisfaction

The rising *now* can be used to persuasively express regret.

1. Why didn’t you ask me *now*?
2. This is not what I asked you to bring *now*.

The first statement above can sometimes express a combination of advice and rebuke. That is, there is only a mild anger. Maybe a child picks something without permission whereas the child would not have been refused the same thing if he had asked. The parent rebukes the child for picking the item without permission and calmly persuades the child to ask when next he needs the item. The parent in this case is not really angry. If the parent is really angry, *now* will not be added to the sentence and the last syllable will have a falling tone. And of course there will be a problem with the sentence if *now* is used in reference to time.

**7.3. Angry Plea or Persuasion**

It can be used when pleading angrily.

*Please, now. May I have some food?*

Using *now* with a falling tone may sound senseless if it is not referring to time. In RP, *please* may be said using a rising tone; but in PNE, *please* is said with a falling tone and rising *now* is added. In this case, it could be said that the rising tone is used similarly to RP but the grammatical content that warrants the use of the rising tone differs.

*Come now, eat now* and other similar expressions are mostly used to cajole a child who is refusing to do what he or she is required to do. In this case the child may be refusing to come or to eat.

The same expression may be used to show anger; when the speaker is becoming frustrated after a period of unsuccessful persuasion. In which case, we can now say that the rising *now* cannot be tied down to any particular expression of emotion.

1. It is used to express discomfort or annoyance  
As mentioned in 3 above, *now* said with a rising tone can be used to express several emotions making it really hard to tell what particular emotional expression may be identified by the use of a rising tone. Hence, we may say that facial expression is more key to knowing whether a person is speaking angrily or excitedly even when he or she uses the rising tone.
2. It can be used to show an attitude of encouragement.  
*Try now* can have the same meaning with NE *Just try*, but the former has a rising tone on the final syllable as a result of the added *now*, while the latter has a falling tone. Also, the former has the tendency to be more persuasive than the latter because of the rising tone on *now*. In RP, *Just try* will achieve the same emotional expression as NE *try now*.

Let him talk, *now*, may be used to warn someone trying to stop another from speaking when he is actually needed to speak, or the speaker is irritated that the addressee is wasting time. *Leave me now (let me go), stop that now, let's go now* are expressions of discomfort using the rising *now*.

NE *Leave me now* (Let go of me)



BE *Leave me now* (Go away this moment)



NE *Go now* (Go away this moment)



**8. The rising “Ehen”**

*Ehen* is used to mean *go on* when encouraging someone to speak on. It could also mean *so what*. Sometimes it collocates with or compliments the rising *now* for emphasis.

/ɛhen nau/  
Ehen now. (Yes of cause)



/ɛhen let ha se it nau/  
Ehen, let her say it now. (Then let her say it)



*Ehen* could also mean *go on* or *next* when a list is being given.

A: I went to the market.

B: E/hen

A: I bought some food.

B: E/hen

A: That's all.

When *ehen* is said with a falling tone, the meaning is completely different. It could mean consent. For instance

A: *Please, come to the dining room.*

B: e/hen.

Sometimes, it is used to emphasise a statement of warning.

E/hen, you have started again. (Be careful, don't start.)

It could be used to express satisfaction.

E/hen, you can continue. (You are now free to continue.)

E/hen, that is what I am talking about. (Good, now you understand what I mean.)

However, the falling *ehen* is more likely limited to pidgin communication that its rising counterpart which has multiple meanings.

**9. Conclusion**

It is really important to identify the different uses of intonation and the meanings attached to them in relation to the environment in which they are used. A number of Nigerians may actually not have noticed the peculiar ways they have been using *now* and *ehen* because it is largely a product of the subconscious. It is however important to note that intonation in Nigerian English is not entirely the same as in British English. In spoken Nigerian English, *now* does not at all time refer to time even in a statement that it could be read to indicate time.

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