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'Between Rules and Representations:' Phonological Processes in Bini Based English*y*

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Abstract

This paper examined some phonological processes in Bini based English, a sub-variety of Nigerian English, and compared these processes with Received Pronunciation (RP) to assess conformity levels. Purposive samples of twenty (20) Bini speakers of English were recorded, and their pronunciations were compared to the RP model using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for accuracy. Specifically, the study identified and analysed dominant phonological processes in the pronunciation of the subjects, using the framework of Generative Phonology. The processes include consonant deletions (e.g., the omission of final consonants), vowel substitution (e.g., the schwa being replaced by stronger vowels), consonant insertion, stopping, depalatalization, vocalization, and metathesis. Notably, these Bini-English bilinguals demonstrated a high level of deviation from RP norms, with specific challenges in consonant insertion and vowel reduction. Findings in the study revealed that Bini speakers of English have fairly internalized English phonological rules as only 47.98% (approximately 48%)

could appropriately pronounce the words while a remarkable proportion of approximately 52% were unable to pronounce the words correctly. This is apparently because of the influence of mother tongue on the speech production of the subjects, and also because English phonological and orthographical systems are different from those of their indigenous language. It is based on these findings that the study affirms that nativisation, which is a product of language contact, is inevitable in the Nigerian situation.

Keywords: phonological, Bini English, sub-variety, Nigerian English, nativisation

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual country with over 400 indigenous languages. These languages are roughly associated with different ethnic nationalities (Ugorji, 2010). Of these many languages, there are three major languages: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, which have earned the status of national languages because it has over 26 million speakers. Other Languages like Bini, Efik, Fulfude, Tiv and Igala which have an average of a million speakers and below, are classified as Languages of Immediate Community or Environment (LIC) while those with lesser speakers than a million are classified as minority languages (Ugorji, 2010). Despite these many languages, Nigeria has chosen English language to be her official language which came into the country as a product of colonialism.

Despite the primacy of English over the indigenous languages in Nigeria, Nigerian users of English have not attained proficiency in it. This is because of the fact that Nigerians have acquired a set of habits in their native languages which now make learning of the second language difficult. Due to the influence that native languages have on English which is a second language, there is a rise of a new variety of English called Nigerian English which also has its sub-varieties depending on the area it is spoken in the country. The Nigerian English variety can be singled out on the

bases of its phonology, grammar, lexis, collocations, idioms, discourse and style, code-mixing and code-switching, and a lack of homogeneity (Ugorji, 2010).

To this end, linguistic evidence has, over the years, been presented to support the notion of Nigerian English. From Brosnaham (1952), through Walsh (1967), Banjo (1969), many linguists like Adetugbo (1977), Bamgbose (1971, 1982), Jubril (1982), Odumuh (1984), Awonusi (1985), Ska (1985), Bamiro (1994), etc have identified various characteristics of Nigerian English, thus moving away from the notion of referring to the phenomenon as 'English language in Nigeria'.

Awonusi (2010) in his paper titled: "Revisiting West African English: Evidence from Nigerleone", argues that the identification and recognition of Nigerian English have, at least, two implications. Firstly, that we are made to believe that Nigerian English is a variety of World or International English, or it is a sub-variety of regional variety, i.e., the West African variety. Secondly, that we were made to confront the nagging problem of panlectal versus polylectal grammars. He also argues that regional varieties, being the first step in variation clone deserve equal, if not higher, recognition than the lower-level varieties and sub-varieties with evidence particularly phonological and lexical, across national frontiers in Anglophone West Africa. He opines that these linguistic evidences pull us in the direction of proposing regional rather than national spatialects of English in Africa.

For Williamson (1969), the following are the predominant phonological characteristics of Igbo speakers of English: a. the neutralization of the tense /lax distinction in vowels (e.g. /kæt/ (cat), /kɑ:t / (cart)→[kat]; /kɔ:t/ (court), /kɒt/ (cot)→[kɔt]; b. the monophthongisation of diphthongs (e.g. /geɪt/ (gate) →[get]; /gəʊ/ (go)→[go]); c. the absence of the central vowels which by implication means the absence of the centring diphthongs (e.g. /lʌv/ (love) →lɔv/; /nɜs/ (nurse)→[nɔs]; /brʌðə/

(brother)→[brɔdɑ]; /ʧiə/ (cheer), /ʧɛə/(chair) →[ʧia]);d. the transfer of the Igbo vowel harmony system in which only vowels from the same set can co-occur in a word into English (e.g. /bɒrəʊ/ (borrow)→[boro]; /bitɪŋ/ (beating)→[bitin]), and e. the neutralization of the distinction between /eɪ/ and /ɛ/, realized as [e] and [ɛ] respectively, which are allophones of one phoneme in Igbo (e.g. /geɪt/ (gate), /gɛt/ (get) →[get]).

Thus, relying on the literature, we can say that Nigerian English is a valid dialect of English having sub-varieties with peculiar features and enduring future prospect. In this study therefore, we shall concentrate on NE with focus on studying Bini English phonological processes. Bini English is one of those sub-varieties of Nigerian English largely influenced by mother tongue interference and other social variables like linguistic group, age, sex and level of education, etc. It is the task of this paper to investigate the different phonological processes in this sub-variety of NE and compare it with what is obtainable in the RP accent of English. This will give us an idea of the conformity level of Bini English variety when compared to the aforementioned 'standard' variety.

This article seeks to establish the level of conformity of the speech production of the Bini speaker of English to the standard norm of pronunciation. It adds to the characteristics of Nigerian English that already exist in the literature and expose certain features of Bini English that will help language learners appreciate peculiarities in Nigerian English variety. This study, therefore, contributes to the broader understanding of Nigerian English by highlighting Bini English's unique phonological traits and providing a reference point for further linguistic research on Nigerian English varieties.

The article investigates the phonological processes in Bini English and identifies the processes that characterise for the change in the

surface realization as against the underlying representation using the generative frame work. In this research we will also show the level of conformity of Bini English to the Received Pronunciation. The IPA symbols would be used to describe sounds. The analysis will be limited to representative data drawn from twenty (20) speakers of Bini English.

This paper examines the phonological processes in Bini English. The reason for this is to identify some phonological processes that may occur in the utterances of a Bini speaker of English. Thus, the specific objectives are:

1. To identify the phonological processes in Bini English
2. To compare the processes with those obtained in the Received Pronunciation accent of English.
3. To identify and discuss the divergences and convergences at the phonetic (surface) and phonological (underlying) levels.
4. To examine the level of consistency in the sustenance of these processes among Bini English speakers

From observations, the Bini speakers of English find it difficult to correctly apply English phonological rules in their speech production due to certain factors. It is also noticed that certain words are not conveniently articulated thereby giving rise to some phonological processes. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the phonological processes in Bini English?
2. What is the similarity in processes compared with those obtained in the Received Pronunciation accent of English?
3. What are the divergences and convergences at the phonetic (surface) and phonological (underlying) levels?
4. What is the level of consistency in the sustenance of these processes among Bini English Speakers?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts, as its theoretical underpinnings, the generative approach to the study of language and, indeed, sound/speech segments. Generative Phonology is a theoretical framework which originated from the work of Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle in the mid-twentieth century. This approach emphasized the role of underlying representations and the rules that map these to surface forms. According to Chomsky and Halle (1968), the underlying representation is the abstract, mental representation of a linguistic form before it is articulated, while the surface representation is the actual phonetic form that is produced. This distinction was described by them in their seminal work titled: *The Sound Pattern of English*, published in 1968.

The approach makes use of phonological rules which are processes that transform the underlying representations into surface forms example A→B/C— which means A becomes B only when it occurs in the environment after C. According to Halle (1992:53) "phonological rules are intended to account for the systematic changes that occur between underlying and surface representations, reflecting the natural and predictable patterns observed in language."

Yul-Ifode (1999) defines phonological processes as those changes which segments undergo that result in the various phonetic realizations of underlying phonological segments. For example, in English, the [k] in the word 'electric' changes to [s] and [ʃ] in 'electricity' and 'electrician' respectively. These changes are known as phonological processes. Some specific phonological processes that are analysed within this framework include:

i. Assimilation**:** This is where a sound becomes more like a neighbouring sound. Example: in the word *m<u>a</u>n* for example, [ã] is nasalized because of the bilabial nasal/m/ that precedes it.

/a/ ⟶ ã /m-

ii. Elision: where sounds are omitted in certain environments, for instance, in some [r]-less dialects of English, word final –[r] is deleted.
Examples
[mʌθə] 'mother'

iii. Vowel Reduction**:** This is where vowels are pronounced with less distinctiveness in unstressed syllables like in the case of schwa sounds. An example is the word 'phonetics' [fə ˈnetiks], 'photography' [fə ˈtɔgrəfi]. Yul-Ifode (1999) describes phonological processes as systematic changes in the production of phonemes, resulting in variations in pronunciation that are regular and predictable.

In examining Bini English using Generative Phonology in the present study, the focus is on how the underlying phonological representations of Bini speakers of English map onto their surface pronunciations.

Research Methodology

The core of this research is the investigation of the application of phonological rules among some Bini speakers of English. In doing this, twenty Bini speakers of English were chosen. These speakers have at least gone through the secondary school level of education. The selection of subjects was based on the assumption that these people might have been exposed to the studies of English sounds and how they are pronounced. This will determine the extent to which these concepts have been internalised by the speakers and how level of education, gender, region, age have interfered with their performances. The selected words are those that are observed to pose challenges to non-native speakers of English.

A questionnaire was administered in order to ascertain their age, gender, region, linguistic background and level of education. Subsequently, speakers were required to articulate a set of words that are structured in a way that the speakers' competence in this

area could be tested. Responses from the speakers were recorded. The *Longman Talking Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* were used as control as these will give us the Standard British pronunciation of these words. The data was analysed using the phonological rules within the framework of generative phonology. Also, variables such as gender, orthography, education and region intervened in our analysis.

Each of the words was classified under different phonological processes observed in them. The responses were then described in relation to the processes and rules. The numbers of deviations were counted and calculated using simple percentage and comparison was also made to ascertain similarity with the Received Pronunciation.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The total of respondents is twenty. Each respondent pronounced the twenty words presented herein. From their responses, the following analysis and findings were deduced.

Consonant Deletion

This involves the omission of consonant sounds in certain environments.

Table 1

S/N	Words	Potential score	Frequency of deviations	Frequency of correct articulation	Percentage of deviations (%)	Percentage of correct articulation (%)
1.	Sword [sɔ:d]	20	3	17	15	85
2.	Plumb [plʌm]	20	15	5	75	25
3.	Bomb [bɔm]	20	15	5	75	25
4.	Wednesday [wenz.deɪ]	20	4	16	20	80
5.	Phlegm [flɛm]	20	19	1	95	5
6.	Young [jʌŋ]	20	14	6	70	30
7.	Climb [klaɪm]	20	13	7	65	35

8.	King [kiŋ]	20	14	6	70	30
9.	Listen [li.sˢn]	20	1	19	5	95
10.	Debt [det]	20	20	0	100	0
11.	Subtle [sʌt.l]	20	18	2	90	10
12.	Sachet [saʃeɪ]	20	17	3	85	15
	Total	240	153	87	63.75	36.25

From the data, nineteen (19) subjects articulated *listen* correctly. Only one (1) subject had a deviant pronunciation. *Sword* was pronounced correctly by seventeen (17) subjects; only three (3) subjects had a deviant pronunciation. *Wednesday* had only four subjects inserting the consonant [d], the other subjects, pronounced it correctly. The most difficult word to pronounce for these subjects in this process is *debt.* All the subjects pronounced it as [debt], none of the subjects articulated the word correctly. *Phlegm* was articulated by nineteen subjects as [flɛg], only one subject pronounced it correctly. The next in the hierarchy is the articulation of *subtle.* The word was pronounced as [sɔbtu] by eighteen (18) of the subjects, only two (2) articulated it correctly by deleting the [b]. Seventeen (17) subjects pronounced *sachet* as [saʃet] only three (3) subjects deleted the final [t]. *Plumb* and *bomb* were articulated by fifteen (15) subjects with retention of [b], only 5 subjects articulated it correctly. The sound [ŋ] was released as [g] by fourteen (14) subjects as in the case of *young* and *king.* Only six (6) subjects articulated the words correctly.

Vowel substitutions

Table 2

S/N	Words	Potential score	Instances of vowel substitution	Instances of correct articulation	Percentage (%) of substitution	(%) of correct articulation
1	Judges ʤʌ.ʤɪz/	20	18	2	90	10
2	Wanted /wɔn.tɪd	20	20	00	100	00
3	Chocolate [ʧɔkˢlət]	20	13	7	65	35
4	Listen [lɪsˢn]	20	15	5	75	25

5	Photography [fətɔgrəfɪ]	20	20	00	100	00
6	Hospital [hɔspitᵊl]	20	18	2	90	10
7	Rebel (N) [rebᵊl]	20	2	18	10	90
8	Sudden [sʌdᵊn]	20	12	8	60	40
9	Pattern [pætᵊn]	20	7	13	35	65
10	Button [bʌt.ᵊn]	20	12	8	60	40
11	Maintenance [meɪn.tᵊn.əns]	20	18	2	90	10
12	Covenant [kʌv.ᵊn.ənt]	20	16	4	80	20
13	Category [kæt.ə.gᵊrɪ]	20	16	4	80	*20*
	Total	260	187	73	71.92	28.08

All the subjects replaced [ɪ] with [e] in the word [wɔntɪd]. There ….no instance of correct pronunciation. Also, in the production of *photography*, the schwas at the initial and final syllables were both realized as [ɔ] and [æ] respectively by all the subjects. The words *judges* [ʤʌʤɪz] had eighteen (18) subject interchange [ʌ] with [ɔ]. Only two subjects pronounced it correctly.

The reduction of the vowel strength to schwa [ə] in an unstressed syllable constituted a great challenge to the subjects. In most cases, the schwa was replaced with different stronger vowels in different environments. In the pronunciation of *maintenance*, just two (2) of the subjects could appropriately produce the schwa in the second syllable of the word and 18 subjects substituted the schwa with diphthong [eɪ].

In *hospital*, the weak schwa [ə] and the final /l/ had two different realizations here [ʊl and æl]. They were realized as [ʊl] by a larger proportion of the subjects (16). [æl] was produced by a minute proportion of 2, and only 2 subjects could pronounce the schwa [ə] correctly.

The next in the hierarchy of difficulty is *category*. Four (4) of the subjects appropriately pronounced the weak schwa while 16

mispronounced it as [əʊ]. In *covenant*, the weak schwa [ə] was lengthened and realized as [e] by 16 subjects while 4 of the subjects were able to render the correct form. The pronunciation of *listen* was also difficult because only five (5) of the subjects could give the actual realization of the schwa [ə] while the remaining fifteen (15) subjects realized it as [ɪ]. The next in hierarchy is *chocolate*, seven (7) of the subjects could reduce the quantity of the vowel to shwa /ə/ while the remaining thirteen (13) subjects substituted the [ə] with the diphthong [əʊ].

In *sudden*, the schwa was realized as [ɪ] by 12 subjects and only 8 subjects pronounced it accurately. *Button* is same in hierarchy with *sudden.* It was produced as [bɔtɪn] by 12 subjects and [bʌtˢn] by 8 subjects. The least difficult among them are *rebel and hospital*, only 2 of the subjects uttered it as [rebʊl] and in *hospital*, the weak schwa [ə] has two different realizations here [ʊl and æl]. The schwa was realized as [ʊl] by a larger proportion of the subjects (14). The second allophone was produced by a minute proportion of 4, and only 2 subjects could pronounce the schwa [ə] appropriately.

Consonant Insertion

Seventeen (17) subjects realized the word *sachet* [saʃeɪ] as [saʃeɪ] while others pronounced it correctly. Also the word Subtle [sʌt.l] was realized by eighteen (18) subjects as [sɔb.tu]. Only two subjects did not insert the consonant [b]. Below is a tabular representation.

Table 3

S/N	Words	Potential score	Instances of consonant deletion	Instances of consonant insertion	% of insertion	% of correct pronunciation
1	Sachet [saʃeɪ]	20	3	17	85	15
2	Subtle [sʌt.l]	20	2	18	90	10
	Total	40	5	35	87.5	12.5

Stopping

Only two (2) subjects pronounced *wealthy* [welθɪ] correctly. Eighteen (18) subjects replaced [θ] with the stop [d]. Fifteen (15) subjects articulated *length* and *tenth* as [lent] and [tent] respectively while five (5) subjects articulated it correctly. *Width* seems to be better articulated by the subjects, twelve (12) subjects articulated it correctly, only eight subjects (8), had a deviant pronunciation.

Table 4

S/N	Word	Potential score	Instances of stopping	Instances of correct pronunciation	% of stopping	% of correct pronunciation
1	Width [widθ]	20	8	12	40	60
2	Length [lenθ]	20	15	5	75	25
3	Wealthy [welθɪ]	20	18	2	90	10
4	Tenth [tenθ]	20	15	5	75	25
	Total	80	56	24	70	30

Vocalization

Here, syllabic nasals are mostly substituted by the vowel [u]. As seen in the table below.

Table 5

S/N	Words	Potential score	Instances of syllabic consonant replacement with a vowel	Instances of correct pronunciation	Percentage (%) of deviation	Percentage (%) of correct pronunciation
1	Subtle [sʌt.l]	20	18	2	90	10
2	Paddle [pæ.dl]	20	20	00	100	00
3	Able [eɪ.bl]	20	19	1	95	5
4	Little [lɪ.tl]	20	19	1	95	5
5	Buckle [bʌ.kl]	20	19	1	95	5

6	Castle [kæ.sl]	20	20	00	100	00
	Total	120	115	5	95.8	4.2

The articulation of syllabic consonants which constitute the peak of a syllable seems to pose difficulties among the selected Bini speakers of English. The subjects in most instances substituted the syllabic [l] with [ʊ], there was no instance of insertion of [u] before [l]. [tl] in *Subtle* [sʌt.l] was pronounced as [tu] by eighteen (18) subjects only two (2) subjects pronounced it correctly.

In the articulation of *little* [li.tl], eighteen (18) of the subjects realized it as [li.tʊ] while only two (2) got the correct pronunciation. *Castle* [kæ.sl] was pronounced as [kæ.sʊ] by all the subjects, there was no instance of correct pronunciation. The pronunciation of *buckle* [bʌ.kl] was realised as [bʌ.kʊ] by nineteen (19) subjects. Only one (1) subject pronounced it correctly.

As for the [dl] in *paddle* [pæ.dl], it was pronounced as [dʊ] by all the subjects. None of the subjects could pronounce it correctly. The [bl] in *able* [ei.bl] was substituted with [bu] by 19 subjects, only 1 subject pronounced it correctly.

Depalatalization

Here a palatal sound is substituted with a non-palatal sound

Table 6

S/N	Words	Potential score	Instances of depalatalization	Instances of correct pronunciation	Percentage (%) of deviation	Percentage (%) of correct pronunciation
1	Tune [tju:n]	20	14	6	70	30
	Total	20	14	6	70	30

Tune [tjʊ:n] is the only word that involves the process of palatalization among the variables used. /j/ was omitted and pronounced as /tu:n/ by 14 subjects. It was produced appropriately by only 6 subjects.

Metathesis

Here some sounds are transposed as seen in the table below.

Table 7

S/N	Words	Potential score	Instances of metathesis	Instances of correct pronunciation	% of metathesis	% of correct pronunciation
1	Tax [tæks]	20	8	12	40	60
2	Ask [æsk]	20	5	15	25	75
3	Risk [rısk]	20	4	16	20	80
4	Grasp [gra:sp]	20	16	4	80	20
5	Lips [lıps]	20	0	20	00	100
	Total	100	33	67	33	67

The process of metathesis was recorded in few of the words tested. Though at a very low percent, the most difficult of them is *grasp*. The cluster /sp/ was reordered as [ps] by sixteen (16) subjects. Only four (4) subjects were able to pronounce it accurately.

The next difficult word in this hierarchy is *tax* it was realized by eight (8) subjects as [tæsk], the other twelve subjects were able to articulate it correctly. *Ask* was realized as [æks] by five subjects while 15 subjects articulated it correctly as [æsk]. *Risk* had only four (4) mispronunciations as [riks]. The remaining16 subjects were able to pronounce it correctly as [rısk].

The least difficult was the articulation of *lips.* It did not create problem for any of the subjects; all the subjects were able to pronounce accurately.

Findings

Following the analysis of the English phonological processes in the speech production of the selected Bini speakers of English, the following findings were observed and these invariably proffer answers to the questions raised in an earlier section of this work.

1. To a great extent, there is the influence of mother tongue on the speech production of the subjects. The production of

the syllabic consonant [l] had the highest level of non-conformity. A very minute proportion (4%) of the subjects could appropriately pronounce the syllabic [l]. The respondents would rather substitute the syllabic [l] with [u]. The production of the weak schwa in unstressed syllables also proved difficult for the respondents. They would rather substitute the weak vowels with stronger ones like: [əʊ], [ɪ], [ʊ], [æ], [eɪ] and [e]. Only a percentage of 29.58 could correctly produce the words tested. According to Akinjobi (2009), the realization of English vowels (especially schwa) and consonants that occur in unstressed positions is a major area of deviation from the Standard English usage for Nigerian users of English. These errors are probably as a result of the absence of the weak schwa in the mother tongue of the respondents.

2. Apart from the mother tongue interference, spelling and orthographical discrepancies are also other significant factors that affected the speech production of the respondents. Some of the words were obviously pronounced as spelt by almost half of the sample.
3. Consonant deletion also posed a great challenge to the respondents. This is as a result of the fact that the consonant is apparent in the spelling of the words. A small percentage of thirty six (36%) could correctly delete the consonants where applicable in their renditions.
4. The subjects displayed a higher level of competence in metathesis but vowel insertion was on a high side
5. There is also a high level of stopping and depalatalization in the speech of the respondents with a percentage of 30 in conformity to Received Pronunciation.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this research has been to examine phonological processes in Bini English. To achieve this, we engaged the literature and several previous works were examined

to establish the research so far on some of the characteristics of Nigerian English. In addition to this, data was obtained from twenty Benin speakers of English. Consequently, fifty-three (53) words were used to test the subjects' competence in the application of some of English phonological rules.

From their performance, findings revealed that Benin speakers of English have fairly internalized English phonological rules. Only 47.98% (approximately 48%) could appropriately pronounce the words while a remarkable proportion of approximately 52% were unable to pronounce the words correctly. The implication of this is that no matter how much we try to imbibe the rules of standard British English phonology in second language situation, there are limitations to the performances of the speakers. This is apparently because the English phonological and orthographical systems are different from those of the respondents' indigenous language. It is based on these findings that the study affirms that nativisation, which is a product of language contact, is inevitable in the Nigerian situation.

Recommendations

- Nigerian linguists should intensify their efforts on differentiating errors from varieties. To achieve this, there is the need to set up institutions that will promote a standard variety for the users of Nigerian English as different varieties are evolving.
- Within the Benin community, English based Pidgin is more rampant when compared to the use of Standard English. This is quite obvious from the data collected as respondents could hardly achieve fifty percent of conformity when compared to Received Pronunciation. Benin speakers of English should strive to maintain a balance between communicating in Pidgin and standard English

- In as much as Nigerian English is not a language of its own, the teaching of English should be tilted towards the standard form of the language so that its intelligibility will span beyond immediate socio-cultural domains.

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