# Analysis of Users' Acceptability and Understanding of Three Nigerian English Accents for Teaching and Communication

*By*

Fatimayin Foluke

*Faculty of Education,*
*National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos.*

## Abstract

This study investigated the point of agreement by Nigerian English (NE) users about which of the 3 NE accents, based on regional parameters, is generally understood and accepted as the variety to use with a view to arriving at a possible norm of usage for teaching and communication purposes. The subjects were one hundred and eighty Nigerians of varied socio-economic, educational and ethno-linguistic backgrounds drawn from various offices, institutions in Kaduna, Enugu, Ibadan. This is made up of 60 respondents per region, 20 per accent per region making up a total of 180. Respondents' ages range between 20 and above 60 years. Two researcher-designed instruments were used. First is the Oral Reading Test for Accent identification made up of phonological difficulties usually exhibited by NE language users. Next is a questionnaire in the form of an intelligibility and acceptability rating scale. Based on the findings, the educated NE accent was the most intelligible and acceptable, followed by the mother-tongue based NE accent and the Regional NE accent, it was recommended among others that language policy makers confront the problem of the NE corpus to be used in teaching and the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council be commissioned to produce texts on the phonology and phonetics of the Educated NE accent.

**Keywords:**  Nigerian English, accents, varieties, World Englishes, understanding, accepting

## Background

The language situation in Nigeria is a result of languages in contact resulting in Bilingualism / multilingualism. However, languages can hardly come in contact without cultures coming together. That is, biculturalism occurs in language contact. Events in the country from colonialism to the present coupled with the use of the English language (EL) contributed to such acculturation. While this can be an advantage in a number of contexts like education, socialization, international affairs, it could also pose psychological problems in the regulation of behaviour patterns, group identity, patriotism and nationalism. This could lead to culture conflicts.

Evidently, the culture conflict that exists in the Nigerian bilingual society aided the evolution of Nigerian English (NE). This in turn, emphasizes the fact that the appropriate use of the EL in Nigeria must reflect the society as well as serve her citizens and not overwhelm them. Jowitt (1991) observed that sympathetic 'sorry' is the conventional translation of a one word lexeme in the mother tongues (MTs). For example, Hausa, 'sannu,' Igbo 'ndo', Yoruba: 'pele', Tiv: 'nsugh', and Edo: 'koyo'. This and others are peculiarly Nigerian and cannot be said to break general rules. They are rather justified on semantic grounds showing an adaptation of the vocabulary of the EL to fill a semantic gap that exists because of the difference between British and Nigerian cultures. This too could be justifiable for NE accents because  accents to be used by Nigerians should be Nigerian so as to fill the phonological gaps that exist because of differences between British and Nigerian phonological set ups and articulatory settings.

Another problem which NE would hopefully be a cure for is in language teaching and testing. The continued dominance of the EL and the ambiguous language policy are mostly at the root of the teaching and learning problems. This is compounded by the projection of standard British English (SBE) as being superior to all varieties of English in Nigeria. These varieties include the educated, the regional and the mother tongue-based.  According to Odumuh

cited in Ohia (1997), one of the problems of teaching English in Nigeria is in the confusion as to what to accept as permissible regional varieties and what to reject as 'sub-standard'.

To find a lasting solution to the above problem, it is expedient to find an acceptable Nigerian variety of the EL. This is necessary at this point because the issue of the increasing functions of the EL without a change in status (as $L_2$`) has a direct relationship with students' poor performance in public examinations. The immediate concern should be to develop a norm that would be generally acceptable as standard Nigerian spoken English. This may upon approval be taken as a basis for assessing language competence in the educational system as well as for communication purposes. Efforts should be geared toward integrating the EL and the indigenous languages for effective communication and for solution to the country's language problems. This is really necessary as attempts at promoting the indigenous languages through the language in education policy (revised draft 2007) have not been fruitful. The most likely option now as a forward is an acceptable variety of NE. The purpose of the study therefore is to find out which of the varieties users understood and accept most.

## Statement of the Problem

After its advent into the country, EL usage is characterized by some Nigerians using SBE, others, educated Nigerian spoken English and for a large majority, MT interference features manifests in their speeches. This is a result of the language being badly taught and the influence of the local languages which made performance in the EL peculiar.

The thrust of this study is to ascertain the NE accent that is most understood and accepted by the users with a view to identifying the convergence of agreement which can serve as a pointer towards the norm and also determine the reference point for standardization. It used the degree of convergence among the users' perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception to measure

users' understanding and acceptability of NE accents for everyday communication and educational use.

## Literature Review

NE has emerged and stabilized. It is a term used in reference to variety of English used in Nigeria which is neither pidgin nor Standard British. It is English with a distinctive Nigerian flavour, resulting from contact between the EL and Nigerian languages. It is an indigenized variety of English as an international language. The development of NE followed the global patterns described as the result of contact between languages and cultures.

While it is true that NE has emerged and has distinct linguistic features, it is also true that it has not fully developed into a standard comparable to other world standard Englishes. This is because there are still some fundamental issues to be resolved. But out of the varieties that exist, a norm can be identified as being the variety understood and accepted by all for the linguistic purpose of the Nigerian nation. This will in turn enable the Nigerian variety assume the role of a national language as well as contribute to the varieties of World Standard Englishes (WSE).

NE has many varieties. This includes the Educated Nigeria English variety (ENE), the Regional Nigerian English variety (RNE) and the Mother Tongue-based Nigerian English variety (MTbNE) among others. It is however noteworthy that some academics and high profile citizens occasionally exhibit regional or mother tongue interferences in speech. This is quickly corrected during the conversations.

Empirical work in the area of the phonology of NE can be examined in two parts. The first relates to research on varieties differentiation. Banjo (1979) identified four varieties based on linguistic deviations from the standard. Another typology is the regional parameter separating Hausa English (northern) from Igbo English (eastern) from Yoruba English (western). The second part of the empirical research on the phonology of NE relates to tests of intelligibility and

acceptability. These include Tiffen's (1974) study, Ekong (1980), Jibril (1986). The findings suggest that while social acceptability is subject to the democratic process, international intelligibility is more elite inclined (Banjo, 1979). However, Adetugbo (1987) argued that international intelligibility is an unnecessary luxury. To him, there is no reason for this especially as Americans, Australians, Scots have their own varieties of the EL and nobody bothers about international intelligibility.

In support of the above, it is the opinion of this writer that language should serve and not overwhelm its users. Language should be for her users to express their own identity as well as relate with others around them. It should also be a reflection of their total culture. Based on this, what is needed is national intelligibility and acceptability as a first step in the right direction in having Nigerian spoken English. The bottom line after all is for the variety to be understood, and then accepted first by users of the language in its immediate environment before going international.

## Conceptual Framework

This study is conceptualized around some sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and linguistic issues and concepts. The theory of languages in contact is of importance to these concepts and issues, that is the evolution of a new speech form from the communion of two languages. Closely related to the contact theory is the concept of varieties. The varieties of English are a result of languages in contact. They can also be regarded as the production of psycholinguistic interaction between two linguistic systems, those of the mother tongues (MTs) and the second language (L2). Also important is the social contact arising from the interaction between members of these groups which result in cultural and linguistic diffusion producing different varieties.

Crucial to the understanding of these varieties and the present study is the term accent. The Nigerian user of the English language learns it as a second language long after his first language mainly through

formal instruction in school. In addition, the phonological and articulatory settings of the two languages are different. These result in NE accents different from the SBE accents. How intelligible and acceptable these NE accents are to users is of interest to this study. Since NE is a product of the Nigerian complex sociolinguistic environment, it is obvious that its growth, understanding and acceptability will depend on the perception of those in the society. This is in line with Jowitt's (1991) submission that in language understanding, perception precedes production and cognition precedes perception. Related to this is the need to know how others perceive us. It will enable individuals understand their language use as well as that of others. It follows then that users' self perception of their own accent, other accents users' perception and user's metaperception would be an indicator as to which accent is generally intelligible and acceptable. This is illustrated in figure 1.
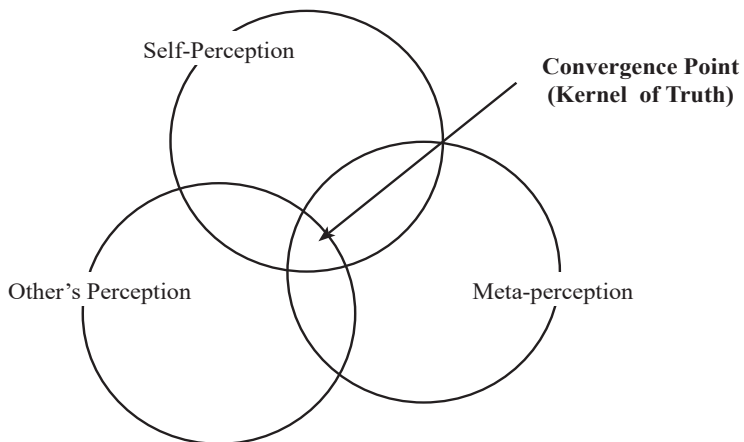


Adapted from Lawal (2000). Assessing Acceptability/Intelligibility of NE Accents.

## Research Questions

The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. What is the self perception of the NE user on how intelligible each of NE accent 1 (i.e. ENEA), NE accent 2 (RNEA), NE accent 3 (MTBNEA) is to him/her?.
2. What is the perception of users of other accents of the intelligibility of each of the three NE accents?
3. What is the users' metaperception (perception of others' perception) of the intelligibility of each of the three NE accents?
4. What is the users' self perception of the acceptability of each of NE accent 1 (i.e. ENEA), NE accent 2 (RNEA), NE accent 3 (MTBNEA)?
5. What is the perception of users of other accents of the acceptability of each of the three NE accents?
6. What is the users' metaperception of the acceptability of each or the three NE accents?

## Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated as a guide to the study.

**Ho$_1$:**   There is no significant difference in the users' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent 1 (i.e. ENEA)

**Ho$_2$:**   There is no significant difference in the users' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the intelligibility of the Accent 2(i.e. RNEA)

**Ho$_3$:**   There is no significant difference in the user' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the intelligibility of accent 3 (MTBNEA)

**Ho$_4$:**   There is no significant difference in the user' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the acceptability of accent 1 (ENEA)

**Ho$_5$:** There is no significant difference in the user' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the acceptability of accent 2 (RNEA)

**Ho$_6$:** There is no significant difference in the user' perception, other accents users' perception and the users' metaperception of the acceptability of accent 3(MTBNA)

**Methodology**

This is a descriptive survey type. The population for this study comprised all Nigerian users of the EL. The target population is made up of Nigerians with varying levels of formal education as for example university graduates, NCE holder, undergraduates, newscasters and other professionals whose competence in the language is based on the fact that they were taught English language in school and have been using it for communication purposes both nationally and internationally. The country was divided into three language regions i.e. North (Kaduna, Hausa dominated), East (Enugu, Igbo dominated), West (Ibadan, Yoruba dominated), using stratified sampling. Incidental sampling was used to get the organizations and establishments where the samples were reached. Random sampling was carried out to get 60 respondents per region where the MT is for example, the north-Hausa dominated: east-Igbo and west- Yoruba dominated.. The distribution of the sample is represented in the table.

**Table1: Sampling Grid**

| Regions | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Accent** | N | W | E | Total |
| 1 (ENE) | 20 | 20 | 20 | 60 |
| 2 (RNE) | 20 | 20 | 20 | 60 |
| 3 (MTB) | 20 | 20 | 20 | 60 |
| **Total** | 60 | 60 | 60 | 180 |

Two researcher-designed instruments were used. First is the Oral Reading Test for Accent Identification. Here, an admixture of NE users read a short passage and sentences. These not only have areas of phonological difficulties usually exhibited by NE language users but all the sound segments of the language. A table of specification of items on the test was used to streamline respondents into the appropriate accents used by them. Next, the intelligibility and acceptability rating scale in form of a questionnaire with speech recording of the accents used by three speakers, one from each of the identified language regions was used to obtain respondents' views. The questionnaire was drawn in such a way that respondents were also judges of how intelligible and acceptable the accents to which they have listened were.

The reliability index of the instruments was determined through test-retest technique three weeks after the first administration. Using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistics, a reliability coefficient of 0.72 was obtained. The researcher with the help of 9 research assistants, 3 per region, monitored the speech recordings, listened to respondents read and administered the questionnaire. Data was analyzed using mean, and Standard Deviation to answer the research questions, while the six hypotheses were analyzed with the statistical tool of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

**Findings**

*Hypotheses Testing*

**Hypotheses 1:** There is no significant difference in users' self–perception, other accents users' perception and users' metapercerption of the of the intelligibility of the intelligibility of Accent1

**Table 2:** ANOVA and Duncan post hoc test result of each users' self-perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent1

|  | Sum of square | Df | Mean square | F | Sig | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | 19.83 | 2 | 9.91 |  |  |  |
| Within groups | 389.30 | 177 | 3.33 | 2.98 | .050 | Significant |
| Total | 409.13 | 119 |  |  |  |  |

## Duncan post hoc Test Result

| Intelligibility of Accent |  | Subset for alpha = .05 |  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Users'self perception | N | I |  |
| Other accent User's perception | 49 | 5.12 | *a |
| User's metaperception | 58 | 5.29 | a |
| Significance | 73 | 5.42 | b |
|  |  | .369 |  |

\* Means of the same letter are not significantly different

**Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant difference in users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent 2

**Table 3:** ANOVA result of each users' self-perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent 2

| Between groups | Sum of squares | Df | Means square | F | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Within groups | | 2 | | .168 | Not Significant |
| Total | .624 | 177 | .312 | | |
| | 216.576 | 119 | 1.851 | | |
| | 217.200 | | | | |

**Hypothesis 3:** There is no significant difference in users' self-perception, other Accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent3

36

**Table 4:** ANOVA and Duncan post hoc test result of each users' self-perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent3

|  | Sum of square | df | Mean square | F | Sig | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | .624 | 2 | 19.74 | 5.81 | .004 | Significant |
| Within groups | 397.64 | 177 | 3.40 |  |  |  |
| Total | 437.13 |  | 119 |  |  |  |

**Duncan post hoc Test Result.**

| Intelligibility of Accents |  | Subset for alpha = .05 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Users'self perception | N | I | a |
| Other accent User's perception | 58 | 5.18 | b |
| User's metaperception | 73 | 5.46 | c |
| Significance | 49 | 5.79 |  |
|  |  | .35 |  |

* Means of the same letter are not significantly different

**Hypothesis 4:** There is no significant difference in users'self-perception, other Accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent1.

**Table 5:** ANOVA and Duncan post hoc test result of each user's self-perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent1.

|  | Sum of square | Df | Mean square | F | Sig | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | 12.23 | 2 | 6.12 | | | Significant |
| Within groups | 280.76 | 177 | 240 | 2.55 | 0.43 | |
| Total | 292.99 | 119 | | | | |

Duncan post hoc Test Result.

|  |  | Subset for alpha = .05 |  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acceptability of accent 1 | N | I | |
| Users' self perception | 73 | 4.90 | |
| Other accent user' Perception. | 58 | 5.18 | b |
| Users' metaperception | 49 | 5.50 | a |
| Sig | | .055 | a |

\* Means of the same letter are not significantly different.

**Hypothesis 5:** There is no significant difference in users' self-perception, other Accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent2.

**Table 6:** ANOVA and Duncan post hoc test result of each user's self-perception, other accents users' perception, users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent2.

|  | Sum of square | df | Mean square | F | Sig | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | 20.22 | 2 | 10.11 | 4.36 | .015 | Significant |
| Within groups | 397.64 | 17 | 3.40 |  |  |  |
| Total | 437.13 | 7 | 119 |  |  |  |

**Duncan post hoc Test Result**

|  |  | Subset for alpha = .05 |  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acceptability of accent 1 | N | I |  |
| Users' self perception | 58 | 5.2105 | a |
| Other accent user' Perception. | 49 | 5.3824 | b |
| Users' metaperception | 73 | .055 | c |
| Sig |  |  |  |

**Hypothesis 6:** There is no significant difference in users'self-perception, other accents users' perception and users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent3.

**Table 7:** ANOVA and Duncan post hoc test result of each users' self-perception, other accents users' perception, users' metaperception of the intelligibility of Accent3

|  | Sum of square | Df | Mean square | F | Sig | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between groups | 8.88 | 2 | 4.44 | 1.6 | .003 |  |
| Within groups | 321.72 | 177 | 2.75 |  |  | Significant |
| Total | 330.59 |  | 119 | 1 |  |  |

**Duncan post hoc Test Result**

|  |  | Subset for alpha = .05 |  |
|---|---|---|---|
| Acceptability of accent 1 | N | I |  |
| Users' self perception | 73 | 5.21 | a |
| Other accent user' Perception. | 58 | 5.29 | a |
| Users' metaperception | 49 | 5.35 | b |
| Sig |  | .66 |  |

\* Means of the same letter are not significantly different

## Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study indicated that Educated NE accent was the most understood and acceptable, followed by the Mother tongued-based NE accent and the Regional NE accent. This agrees with Adetugbo (1987) that local understanding and acceptability rather than international intelligibility and acceptability are necessary especially as the accents are mutually intelligible educated and regional varieties.

Findings also showed that the least acceptable and intelligible was the Regional NE accent. That is, there is a near perfect convergence on the Regional NE accent as the least intelligible. This disagrees with Derwing (2003) that pronunciation problems of adult immigrants had little effect on intelligibility. This finding is an interesting one as it raises the possibility that NE users favour narrow linguistic ethnicism over broad linguistic regionalism.

Findings of the study also indicated significant difference among the three perceptual forms on the intelligibility of both the Educated NE accent and the Mother tongue-based NE accent. This agrees with the submission of Adetugbo (1987) and Awonusi (2004) that every NE user considers his/her accent intelligible at least to him/her.

Generally, there was a high degree of perceptual convergence among the three forms on the acceptability and understanding of each of the three NE accents. Banjo (1979) asserted that every variety of English spoken or written in Nigeria is made up of common core

features (shared by all the varieties) and indexical markers (peculiar to it alone). The implication is that many Nigerians are capable of using and understanding more than one of the varieties. It follows then that all the NE varieties are mutually intelligible in varying degrees.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, there is the need for recognition of the fact that English Language has undergone acculturation and therefore has been indigenised resulting in 'Nigerianisms', i.e. distinctively Nigerian forms flavoured with local flora, fauna and culture. This is the NE with its errors and variants. It is also an indication that NE as a variety of English has come to stay and could be the answer to the nation's strive to get a linguistic identity as well as a solution for her other sociolinguistic problems.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made.

- Language policy makers should realistically confront the problem of the NE corpus to be used in teaching and other educational purposes by commissioning the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council and other allied bodies to produce texts on the phonology and phonetics of the educated NE accent found to be most intelligible and acceptable. This would help the process the standardization and codification.
- Teacher educators should be trained in the rudiments of the Educated NE accent. This would enable students learn the correct and acceptable NE accent to be used in teaching and learning. In addition, curriculum developers should design syllabus with focus on Received Pronunciation (RP) as the ideal target on which to base ENE accent materials.
- Textbook writers should write textbooks based on ENE accent.

# References

Adetugbo, A. (1987). Nigerian English phonology: Is there any standard? *Lagos Review of English Studies* IX, 64 -84

Awonusi, V.O. (2004). The English Language in global context. In A.B.K. Dadzie and S. Awonusi (eds) *Nigerian English: Influences and Characteristics*. Lagos: Concept Pub,33-45

Banjo, A. (1979). Beyond Intelligibility: A presidential address. In E. Ubahakwe, E (ed) *Varieties and Functions of English in Nigeria*. Ibadan: African University press, 7 – 13.

Derwing, T. M. (2003). *What do ESL students say about their accents? In the Canada modern language review 59(4) June.* Retrieved 5/9/2017

Ekong, P.A. (1980).  Investigating into the Intelligibility of a Possible Standard Model for Nigerian Spoken English. In S.O. Umoh. (ed) *Jounal of language Arts and Communication.* 1. (1), 1 – 11.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004, revised 2007). National Policy on Education. Lagos:  NERDC. Press.

Jowitt, D. (1991). Nigeria English Usage: an introduction. Lagos: Longman.

Jibril, M. (1986). Sociolinguistic Variation in Nigerian English. *English  Worldwide* 7, 47  – 75.

Lawal, A. (2000). Perceptual Convergence as a measure of Acceptability and Intelligibility of Nigerian Englishes. Unpublished paper, Faculty of Education, University of Ilorin.

Odumuh, A. (1987). Nigerian English: Selected essays. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, iv, 67.

Ohia I. N. (1997). The Lexicon of Standard Nigerian English as an Acceptability Paradigm among the Educated Elite. An Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis. University of Ibadan.

Tiffen, B. (1974). The Intelligibility of Nigerian English. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of London,  London.