

**LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE VARIETY OF  
ENGLISH SPOKEN BY EDUCATED INDIVIDUALS IN  
SOUTHEAST NIGERIA THROUGH THE LENS OF  
LITERARY WRITERS FROM SOUTHEAST**

By

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**Abstract**

This study made a linguistic analysis of the variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria through the lens of literary works from this region. The study investigated the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic features of this variety of English, using Noam Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) as its theoretical framework. Chomsky's TGG, which posits that all languages share a universal deep structure that underlies surface-level variations, offers an effective tool for examining how the deep structures of Igbo, the predominant first language in Southeast Nigeria, interact with English to produce a localised variety. Using TGG's concepts of deep

and surface structures, the study analyses this linguistic creativity to uncover the cognitive and generative processes underlying the production of Southeast Nigerian English. It argues that while the surface structures of this English variety deviate from Standard English norms, the deep structures reveal universal principles of language, adapted to the sociocultural and linguistic realities of the Igbo-speaking community. Thus, the findings contribute to the discourse on World Englishes, emphasising the legitimacy and value of localised English varieties in global linguistic landscapes. They also have implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria, advocating for pedagogical approaches that recognise and integrate these linguistic realities. Ultimately, this study affirms the dynamic nature of language and its role in reflecting cultural identity and societal evolution.

**Key Words:** English language, regional variety, distinctive features, Southeast Nigeria, dynamic nature of language.

**Introduction:** We all know that language is a dynamic tool for communication and cultural expression which of course, is continually shaped by social, cultural, and educational factors. In multilingual and multicultural society like Nigeria, the use and adaptation of English as the country's official language illustrates a fascinating interplay between global norms and local influences. Nigeria, with over 500 indigenous languages, employs English as a lingua franca and the medium of instruction in formal education, particularly among the educated elite. This context has given rise to a localised variety of English that reflects the linguistic and sociocultural realities of the Nigerian populace. Thus, this study focuses on the linguistic analysis of the variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria. The Southeast of Nigeria is a region predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group.

Incidentally, in this context, the unique linguistic features of the Igbo language interact with Standard English to produce a distinct variety often referred to by some scholars as Nigerian English. While this variety largely conforms to global intelligibility standards, it incorporates phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic elements influenced by the Igbo language and culture. Educated speakers in Southeast Nigeria, through their formal education and exposure to global media, generally, possess a higher proficiency in English. However, their usage often reflects local innovations and adaptations, which can include deviations from native-speaker norms. These linguistic patterns are shaped by factors like first language (L1) interference, the educational system, sociolinguistic identity, and the communicative needs of the local environment.

Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its exploration of how English, as a second language, evolves in a postcolonial context, especially among educated speakers. Understanding these variations can contribute to improving English language pedagogy, fostering greater recognition of localised varieties of English, and promoting linguistic inclusivity in global discourse. The study also situates itself within the broader field of World Englishes, offering a detailed account of the sociolinguistic dynamics in Southeast Nigeria. This research highlights the complex interplay between local and global linguistic forces, enriching the discourse on the localisation and indigenisation of English in multilingual societies.

Notably, one of the most prevalent features of Southeast Nigerian English is its phonological variation. The influence of Igbo language, which has a different sound system compared to English, leads to distinct pronunciation patterns. For example, the /θ/ sound in words like “think” is often replaced with /t/ or /f/, resulting in pronunciations like “tink”

or “fink”, the sound /r/ “run” is sometime realised as /l/ “lun”, the sound /ʒ/ is not found in Igbo language and many others. As one study notes, “... the influence of the mother tongue is evident in the substitution of English sounds that do not exist in the Igbo phonetic inventory” (Awonusi, 2004: 75). This phonological influence creates what is often perceived as an Igbo accent in English, which can be a marker of regional identity but also a source of stigmatisation in certain contexts.

It is obvious that the lexicon of Southeast Nigerian English is also distinct, with frequent code-switching and code-mixing between English and Igbo. This phenomenon is particularly evident in informal communication, where speakers seamlessly integrate Igbo words into English sentences. As Ugot (2010: 112) observes, “... code-switching is a common strategy among bilingual speakers in Nigeria, serving not only communicative purposes but also as a marker of social identity.” Words like “chi” (god or destiny), “biko” (please), “onye” (person), “akwukwọ” (school) or “usekwu” (kitchen) may be used alongside English, creating a hybrid linguistic form that reflects the bilingual nature of the speakers. This lexical blending enriches the language but can also challenge the norms of Standard English, particularly in formal or educational settings. In terms of syntax, Southeast Nigerian English often mirrors the structure of the Igbo language (e.g., *otu one-man biara ebe a*). This is particularly noticeable in sentence construction and tense usage. For example, Igbo’s relatively simple tense system can lead to non-standard tense usage in English, such as using the present tense where the past tense would be expected in Standard English. As Bamgbose (1995) points out, “... the influence of indigenous languages on the grammar of Nigerian English is particularly strong in areas of tense and aspect, where deviations from the norm are common”, p. 63.

This syntactic variation is natural outcomes of bilingualism, where the rules of one language can influence the use of another. The features of Southeast Nigerian English are not just linguistic markers but also carry sociolinguistic significance. The way these features are perceived can vary widely, depending on the context and the attitudes of the listeners. In some cases, these linguistic features are seen as a reflection of the speaker's identity and cultural heritage. As Igboanusi (2002) notes, "... the English spoken in the Southeast is often a source of pride for its speakers, who view it as a legitimate expression of their bilingual reality", p. 45.

However, in more formal settings, such as academia or professional environments, there can be pressure to conform to Standard English norms, leading to negative perceptions of these regional features. The tension between linguistic identity and societal expectations is a central theme in the study of Nigerian English. The distinct features of Southeast Nigerian English present both challenges and opportunities for language education. Educators must balance the need to teach Standard English with the reality of the students' linguistic backgrounds. As Adegbiya (2004) highlights, "... a major challenge in Nigerian education is addressing the gap between the language of the classroom and the language of the community", p. 120. This challenge requires innovative approaches that respect the linguistic diversity of the students while also preparing them for the demands of formal communication. One strategy is to incorporate contrastive analysis into the curriculum, helping students understand the differences between their regional variety of English and the standard form without devaluing their native linguistic practices.

**Theoretical Framework:** This is anchored on Chomsky's Transformational-Generative Grammar (TGG). It provides a robust syntactic framework to analyse how the variety of

English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria diverges from Standard English. TGG explores the deep and surface structures of sentences, transformations between them, and how universal grammatical rules adapt to specific linguistic contexts. Deep structure represents the underlying syntactic arrangement of a sentence, while surface structure is the outward expression of that sentence after transformations. In Southeast Nigerian English, the deep structures often align with Igbo syntactic patterns, influencing the transformations that produce surface structures in English. Transformations modify the deep structure into the surface structure, allowing for language-specific variations. Igbo syntactic features (e.g., topic prominence, focus constructions) shape how English sentences are formed.

TGG posits that languages share universal principles but differ in specific parameters. In this context, English spoken in Southeast Nigeria reflects parameter settings influenced by Igbo syntax. Educated Southeast Nigerians often emphasise the topic of a sentence, reflecting the syntactic structure of Igbo, a topic-prominent language. Example in Igbo *Onye ahụ ọ nweghị ihe ọ na-eme* (Literally means *That person, there is nothing he is doing*). The topic (*onye ahụ* - “that person”) is fronted for emphasis. *That man, he is doing nothing*. This structure diverges from Standard English, where such constructions are less common in casual speech. Deep structure is *He is doing nothing*. Topic fronting, places *that man* at the sentence’s beginning to align with Igbo topic-prominent syntax.

In Southeast Nigerian English, serial verb constructions reflect direct syntactic transfer from Igbo. Example; *O jiri aka ya rụọ ụlọ* (Literal means *He used his hand to build a house*). Serial verbs (*jiri* – “used,” *ruo* – “build”) express a single action. *He used his hand to build the house*. This differs from Standard English, where the same idea might be expressed

more concisely; *He built the house with his hand*. In the Deep structure a single verb (build) governs the action. In transformation, Serial verb structure is retained due to Igbo influence, expanding the surface structure. Igbo uses explicit markers to emphasize focus in a sentence, and this influences English structures. For example, in Igbo, *Ọ bụ akwụkwọ ahụ ka ọ zụtara* (Literally means, It is that book that he bought). The focus marker (*bụ*) highlights the object. *The* equivalent in Southeast Nigerian English, *It is that book that he bought*. Such cleft constructions are more frequent in this English variety than in Standard English. Under TGG Analysis, the Deep Structure, *He bought that book*. In the transformation focus, fronting creates a cleft construction (*It is that book...*), mirroring Igbo focus-marking.

There are cases of direct translation of idiomatic expressions. Educated Igbo speakers often translate Igbo idioms into English, resulting in syntactic deviations. Example in Igbo: *Ọ na-eri ego dị ka mmiri* (Literally means, He spends money like water). Another equivalent in Southeast Nigerian English is, *He is eating money like water*. The verb eating reflects a direct Igbo-to-English translation, though the intended meaning aligns with Standard English (spending). In the deep structure, Igbo idiom governs verb choice. Direct translation into English produces surface structures with Igbo semantic influence. Educated Southeast Nigerian English sometimes reflects Igbo patterns in negation and question formation. Example in Igbo, *Ị na-aga akwụkwọ?* (Literally means, Are you going to school?). Questions in Igbo often rely on intonation rather than inversion. The equivalent in Southeast Nigerian English is, *you are going to school?* (With rising intonation). This contrasts with Standard English, which would use, *Are you going to school?* In the deep structure, declarative sentence (You are going to school). Rising intonation marks a question, influenced by Igbo interrogative structures.

## Levels of Linguistic Variety in the Southeast through the Lens of Literary Texts

Achebe, Nwapa, Adichie, and other Igbo literary artists exemplify the variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria. They do this through proverbs, idioms, lexical borrowings, Igbo-influenced syntax, and code-switching, these authors enrich English to reflect Igbo culture and identity. The comparison across texts reveals a shared linguistic strategy.

(a) Phonological and Lexical Features: Adichie frequently uses dialogue to showcase the phonological and lexical influences of Igbo on English, particularly among educated characters. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna's mother switches between English and Igbo when expressing frustration, which reflects the bilingual nature of educated Nigerians: "You want to kill yourself because of a man? Have you no shame? Onyeara! Foolish person!" (Adichie, 2006, p. 56). This illustrates how Igbo exclamations, such as Onyeara (mad person), are seamlessly integrated into English sentences, showing lexical borrowing and code-switching typical of educated Southeast Nigerians. Also, Achebe incorporates Igbo words into the English text, a hallmark of the variety of English spoken by educated Nigerians. These borrowings help express concepts unique to the Igbo worldview. Examples include "amaala" (kinsmen), "chi" (god/ destiny), "obi" (hut / townhall), and "egwugwu" (masquerader representing ancestral spirits). "Each man's chi is his personal god" (Achebe, 1958, p. 131). These terms illustrate how English is adapted to express cultural concepts that have no direct English equivalents. Efuru was told by her *chi* to sacrifice a white ram to the goddess of the lake". (Nwapa, p. 92). Similarly, "chi" appears as a spiritual force guiding Efuru's life. Nwapa's use reinforces the centrality of this concept in Igbo cosmology.

(b). Code-Switching: Educated individuals often switch between English and Igbo based on context, audience, and communicative purpose. This linguistic flexibility is a hallmark of their bilingualism. “Ezinma, agadi-nwayi!” (Ezinma, old woman).” (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 69). Code-switching here adds emotional depth and authenticity. Code-switching highlights the coexistence of English and Igbo in the communicative repertoire of educated Nigerians. It also reflects a sense of cultural pride and linguistic adaptability. Characters in *Things Fall Apart* occasionally code-switch between English and Igbo, reflecting the bilingual competence of educated Nigerians. “Agbala do-o-o-o! If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment’s rest”. (Achebe, 1958, p. 11). Here, the Invocation blends English narration with Igbo cultural expressions, reflecting the linguistic duality of educated individuals.

(c) Syntax Influenced by Igbo Thought: Achebe’s characters often use sentence structures influenced by Igbo syntax. For instance, rhetorical questions or direct translations of Igbo idioms appear in English. “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently”? (Achebe, 1958, p. 125). This reflects a culturally driven form of questioning, which is a staple in traditional Igbo discourse. The syntax of Nigerian English often mirrors Igbo linguistic patterns, especially in rhetorical or poetic expressions. For example: “A man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself.” (Achebe, p. 133). This sentence structure reflects the parallelism common in Igbo proverbs and thought processes. Direct translations of Igbo ideas into English can also result in unique constructions: “An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb” (Achebe, p. 15). This sentence is a literal translation of an Igbo saying, preserving the cultural and philosophical depth of the original. Adichie’s characters sometimes employ syntactic structures

influenced by Igbo grammar while speaking English, highlighting the subtle interference of L1 structures in their second language. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa-Nnukwu, an educated elder, uses direct translations from Igbo into English when discussing religion: “You do not know that it is by God’s grace that we have this food. Should I not thank Him?” (Adichie, 2003, p. 28). Here, the phrase “Should I not thank Him?” mirrors a rhetorical construction common in Igbo, reflecting the speaker’s linguistic heritage.

(d) **Pragmatic Features and Cultural Expressions:** Educated characters in Adichie’s works often use proverbs and culturally specific expressions in English, reflecting a direct influence of Igbo oral traditions. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Odenigbo, a university lecturer, frequently uses proverbs to emphasise his points: “When the house is on fire, do you waste time chasing rats?” (Adichie, 2006, p. 102). This Igbo proverb, translated into English, reveals how pragmatic strategies in the local language influence English usage among educated speakers. Proverbs are central to Igbo communication, and Achebe incorporates them into the English narrative to reflect this cultural trait. This approach exemplifies how educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria use English to retain their cultural identity. “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten”. (Achebe, 1958, p. 7). This metaphor reflects the importance of proverbs in making language rich and persuasive, a characteristic feature of Nigerian English.

(e) **Identity and Prestige:** Adichie also explores how language use reflects identity and the aspiration for prestige. In *Americana*, Ifemelu comments on the shift in her English when she moves to the United States: “I had to learn to say ‘zee’ instead of ‘zed,’ to pronounce words in a way that lost all the sing-song of my childhood.” (Adichie, 2013, p.143). This reflects the sociolinguistic tension between Nigerian

English and global English norms, particularly among educated Nigerians seeking acceptance abroad.

(f) Formal vs. Informal English Usage: In formal settings, Achebe's characters use Standard English, reflecting their education. For example, when colonial officers and missionaries interact with the Igbo community, the dialogue shifts to more formal English. "We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy." (Achebe, 1958, p. 194). The use of formal English highlights the contrast between local and colonial linguistic practices. This contrasts sharply with the informal, proverb-laden speech of Igbo elders, underscoring the cultural and linguistic divide.

**Conclusion:** The above illustration is a proof that the variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria is a rich and dynamic linguistic form that embodies the interplay between Igbo culture and the English language. Its defining features include lexical borrowings, culturally infused proverbs, Igbo-influenced syntax, phonological patterns, code-switching, and context-sensitive pragmatics. These elements reflect the cultural heritage, bilingual competence, and adaptability of Igbo speakers, making their English usage a powerful tool for cultural preservation and global communication. Through this variety of English, Southeast Nigerians assert their identity, bridging tradition and modernity while resisting cultural homogenization. This linguistic adaptation is not only a testament to the resilience of Igbo culture but also a celebration of the creativity and resourcefulness of its speakers in a multilingual and multicultural world.

**Recommendations:** The unique variety of English spoken by educated individuals in Southeast Nigeria reflects a rich cultural and linguistic heritage. However, to ensure its

continued development and relevance, deliberate efforts must be made to preserve and promote its usage.

- Schools and universities should integrate content that highlights the unique features of Nigerian English and its regional varieties, such as Igbo Nigerian English. Texts by Nigerian authors (e.g., Achebe, Nwapa, Adichie) should be prioritised in the English literature syllabus to familiarise students with how English has been adapted to reflect local realities.
- Train English Language teachers to recognise and validate the use of cultural language materials in classrooms, balancing its use with the teaching of Standard English. Conduct workshops focusing on the socio-cultural aspects of English usage in Southeast Nigeria, encouraging teachers to embrace bilingual teaching strategies.
- Schools should organise seminars and debates that promote understanding of the legitimacy and creativity of regional English varieties. Encourage students to use culturally relevant examples in their writing and speaking assignments.

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