

NIGERIAN ENGLISH AS AN INDEX OF IDENTITY IN LOCALIZED LEXIS AND EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

This paper discusses that Nigerian English (NE) is a paradigmatic variety in the World Englishes paradigm whereby English has transcended its Anglo-American roots to adapt to various cultural settings through nativization, acculturation, and lexical invention, thus acting as a vehicle of socio-cultural identity in the multilingual environment of Nigeria. The key issue being considered is the ongoing marginalisation of NE as a non-standard form of deviation of the standard variety of English, though it has played a central role in promoting national unity amid ethnic disunity as a tension compounded by the homogenising forces of globalisation and the demands of culturally responsive language policies. Data was gathered through oral interaction data, newspapers, and online sources on the basis of a qualitative interpretive methodology and identifies a table of 20 localised lexis and phrases, including, but not limited to, “wahala”, “japa”, “naija”, and “suya”, to show how these term mark ethnic, cultural and social identities by shifting semantics, borrowings and neologisms. The findings reveal tendencies of lexical selection, frequency and variation between spoken and written forms, showing active identity negotiation, performance and contestation, such as the youth-oriented so-called yahoo boy in online language playing with hustler stereotypes or the metaphorical pepper don rest by asserting economic sustainability. The paper concludes by concluding that NE is not a linguistic deviance but a valid, creative national form of expression that enables Nigerians to take ownership of cultural sovereignty that calls upon the scholars and educators to appreciate the depth of expression in NE to bring about greater linguistic equity and pedagogical relevance in the post-colonial society.

Keywords: Nigerian English; World Englishes; Lexical Innovation; Cultural Identity; Postcolonial Linguistics

Introduction

In a general view of World Englishes in which the English language has long evolved beyond its Anglo-American heritage to fit other cultural histories, Nigerian English could be seen as a brilliant model of language accommodation and cultural resilience. In essence, the English language has spread much more than its application in Britain and America and it has adapted to suit the needs of the other cultures; and the Nigerian English is the best example of how language can be manipulated to take on new faces to suit new cultures and retain cultural power in a globalized society. Kachru (1985a: 211) notes that “the institutionalised second-language varieties are long acculturation in new cultural and geographical settings, and they play a broad spectrum of functional roles in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems”. The acculturation is also similar in Nigeria, a multilingual country whose English is not only a colonial residue, but also a source of unity.

Bamgbose (1995: 26) contend that “English language in Nigeria has been pidginised, nativised, acculturated and twisted to convey unfamiliar ideas and patterns of communication”. To the same tune, Adegbija (2004: 20) writes that “we can say that English language in Nigeria has been nativised, Nigerianised or it has been given Nigerian citizenship as a domestic servant does what the master order him to do, so English in Nigeria is now made to do what Nigerians want it to do precisely”. Also, of note is Akere (2009: 3) summarising Alamin A. Mazrui (2004), who

describes domestication of English as the English as an alien medium has changed, to react to local imagery, figures of speech, sound patterns and overall cultural milieu of the area” (cited in Owolabi 2012: 488). Similarly, Jowitt (1991: 47) continues by stating that the Nigerian English is simply the English used by the Nigerians in totality. All these views are consistent with our study highlighting the area of sociolinguistics research which sees NE as not merely an expression but also a constructive force that creates identity through lexis and which needs more detailed exploration across the registers.

Nigerian English turns out to be a hybrid form influenced by more than 500 native languages, which makes the country look like a mosaic of ethnicities. Eziaku, Ndubuaku, Eneremadu (2023: 592) citing Adetugbo (2004: 16) notes that “Nigeria has developed more or less its own unique type of the English language that we now call Nigeria English and which now has a lot of vitality as any other type of English”. The scholars further note that “it is aptly characterised by Achebe (1975) as a new English that was still in communion with the home it belonged to but was pronounced in a way it felt fitted the new environment” (592). Moreover, Bamgbose (1995: 11) goes further to explain that it is “the English language that has been nativised in Nigeria... it is also about the creative development of English as well as development of specific, Nigerian usages, attitudes, and pragmatic use of languages” (also cited in Eziaku, Ndubuaku, Eneremadu 2023: 592). The resulting contact has spawned a distinctive kind of variety in which lexis and expressions are laced with local tastes, and as such they become the symbolic indicators of cultural identity in the face of the globalisation homogenising forces.

In this paper, the interest lies in understanding how localised lexis and expressions in Nigerian English serve as identity indices expressing the interaction between language and socio-cultural belonging. According to Akere (1982: 98) “sociolinguistic fact is that Nigerian English cannot but reflect the characteristics of the cultural life and of the pattern of social behaviour of people who use it”. The discussion is in line with the finding by Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020:1434) that the Nigerian English language portrays ethnolinguistic aspects of influence of local languages by innovative lexical forms and grammatical adaptations to local languages. The scholars are of the opinion that:

The impact of ethnolinguistic experience of Nigerian speakers of English can also be traced at the word level. It includes such aspects as introduction of culture-induced lexical items, back formation, semantic shift, various verb-preposition structures, the omission of function words, semantic expansion of L1 lexical items, retention of anaphoric pronoun in non-subject relativization and certain Nigerian L1-induced grammatical structures among others.

Equally, it affirms the Kaan et al. analysis that the dynamic semantic processes like extension, narrowing, shift, reduplication and neologism creation characterize the Nigerian English, showing its changing lexical identity. These processes allow the worldviews of the Nigerians to be condensed in the most basic ways; something as “long leg” (nepotism) or “wahala” (trouble) is a statement that implicitly asks the question of how those words reflect the identities of the collective.

Why is the study of NE as an index of identity so urgent a scholarly concern? First, it borders the subject of linguistic legitimacy and globalisation. In December 2024, the Oxford English dictionary added entries like “abi”, “adire”, “eba”, “gele”, “Japa”, “Naija”, “suya”, “419”, “yahoo boy”, and the OED comments that “with ownership of English comes ownership of

English words, and therefore some words cannot escape being labelled as such, like yahoo boy, 419 or suya, which was settled on conclusively by OED editors rather than any native speaker. Nigerians have done a special and distinctive contribution to the English as a global language. Second, English is a unifier and a battleground of identity whereby various communities are asserting their belonging using the language in a multilingual and multi-cultural society such as Nigeria as has been in the case of local lexico-semantic variation as Edegbija (1989) articulates it. Third, media and digital communication are becoming the spaces in which NE identity-motivating lexis is spreading. Institutional and ad-hoc studies have not received exhaustive treatment in a corpus-based manner despite Lawal et al. (2025) focusing on identity negotiation through language in social media. Fourth, language policy and pedagogy would be benefited: realising NE as admissibly meaningful lexis, not mistakes, can support more culturally responsive English teaching, in line with the identity-construction by lexis critique of literature offered by Aboh (2012). It is no wonder that this study addresses an urgent interdisciplinary void given these scholarly, sociocultural, and pedagogical stakes.

The problem of the study lies in the fact that Nigerian English continues to be marginalised as a substandard form of the English language, yet it has been used to unite the nation in a divisive society. This has become a topic of intensive scholarly engagement with Ajewole-Orimogunje (2013) contending that it is because the English language has failed to adequately absorb the elements of Nigerian culture that has resulted in importation based on items of lexis and culture-specific vocabulary to represent the Nigerian experience as well as the culture based on the lexis of the English language, Ogunsiji (2001) noting that there are new words and terms being coined every day in order to depict the Nigeria linguo-cultural realities. Moreover, Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020) confirm that “‘Nigerianism’ cannot be regarded as the symptom of poor command of English. Instead, it is better considered as potential indicators of acculturation, and creative disposition that are related to first language (L1) and/or mother tongue use,” while Kperogi (2007) notes that, Nigerian English should not be regarded as a form of lower standard English. Instead, it must be viewed as an acceptable national variety that has materialised through our experiences as a multilingual post-colonial country. Although the current literature recognises the cultural profusion and creative adaptation of Nigerian English, it fails to explore in full the role of certain localised lexis and sociocultural references as an explicit signifier of ethnic, cultural and social identities in spoken and written language. The current paper is based on the discovery of the patterns of choice, frequency, variation and context of such localised manifestations to demonstrate the dynamic negotiation, performance and contestation of identity involved in Nigerian English speakers.

Two implicit research questions can be identified on the basis of this problem: How can specific localised NE lexis, sociocultural references or semantic shifts be used to index ethnic, cultural or social identities in both spoken and written contexts? This is an extension of the fact that NE lexis is culturally resonant (Adegbija, 1989; Adamo, 2007; OED inclusion, 2024; Ekpe, 2006). What are the patterns (of choice, frequency, variation, and context of usage) of such localised manifestations of identity that reveal how identity is negotiated, performed, and contested among speakers of Nigerian English? The question is based on the results of Aboh (2013) on the attempt at identity negotiation in a multilingual environment by Lawal et al. (2025). What are the patterns of these localised expressions, in terms of choice, frequency, variation, and context of use, which suggest how identity is negotiated, performed, and contested by speakers of Nigerian English? This is based on the results of Aboh (2013) as well as on the results of the attempt at

identity negotiation in a multilingual environment by Lawal et al. (2025). This oversimplification conceals the depth of identity within lexis and another kind of analysis is required to afford it a more scholarly location.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative interpretive methodology to explore selected localized lexical expressions with a view of revealing the ways Nigerian English (NE) operates as an identity marker with localised lexis and expressions in both oral and written language. Three sources of data were observed: (1) oral interaction among Nigerians in informal and semi-formal settings (e.g., daily conversations, open speeches, and recordings) and (2) written ones (Nigerian newspapers *The Punch*, *The Guardian Nigeria* etc) and online (Twitter/X posts, Nairaland forums and blogs), thus covering various registers and communication spheres. Data were collected using the non-participant observation approach of gathering spoken data.

Sociolinguistic Performance of Identity in Nigerian English Lexicon

Table: Examples of Localised Lexis in Nigerian English as Identity Markers

No.	Lexis / Expression	Meaning in Nigerian Context	Origin / Source	Identity Indexed
1	Wahala	Trouble, problem, stress	Hausa (loanword), OED 2020	Shared Nigerian stress of daily struggle
2	Long leg	Nepotism, using connections	Nigerian metaphor (Bamgbose 1995)	Critique of corruption, social survival
3	419	Advance fee fraud, scam	Criminal code section, OED 2024	Identity of Nigeria in global fraud discourse
4	Yahoo boy	Internet scammer	Nigerian slang, OED 2024	Youth identity, hustler culture
5	Abi?	Isn't it? Right?	Yoruba interrogative particle	Solidarity in speech, conversational closeness
6	Naija	Informal name for Nigeria	Popularised in pop culture, OED 2024	Youth identity, nationalism
7	Japa	To flee, migrate quickly	Yoruba verb, OED 2024	Contemporary migration/diaspora identity
8	Suya	Spiced grilled meat	Hausa cuisine, OED 2024	Food heritage, cultural pride
9	Gele	Women's head tie	Yoruba, OED 2024	Fashion, femininity, Nigerian aesthetics
10	Adire	Tie-dye fabric	Yoruba textile tradition, OED 2024	Heritage and indigeneity
11	No wahala	No problem / It's fine	Hausa expression	Nigerian resilience, laid-back attitude
12	Eba	Staple food (cassava meal)	Yoruba, OED 2024	Food identity, communal culture

No.	Lexis / Expression	Meaning in Nigerian Context	Origin / Source	Identity Indexed
13	To dash	To give freely (money/item)	Semantic shift from SBE “dash”	Nigerian generosity, transactional culture
14	Senior man / oga	Boss, person of respect	Nigerian pidgin/NE	Hierarchy, social stratification
15	Runs girl / runs	Young woman doing transactional sex	Nigerian slang	Gendered survival identity
16	Hammer	To make sudden money	Nigerian slang, youth culture	Hustler identity, economic aspiration
17	Tokunbo	Fairly used, second-hand goods	Yoruba phrase (“from abroad”)	Consumption culture, import identity
18	Scatter ground	To cause excitement, chaos	Nigerian Pidgin	Youth creativity, performative identity
19	Gist	Gossip, informal talk	Semantic extension from SBE “gist”	Oral culture, social bonding
20	Pepper don rest / pepper don see	Hardship has eased / money has come	Nigerian Pidgin metaphor	Survival and economic struggle identity

The basic assumptions here are that the markers of socio-cultural and economic self-identification are localised lexis in the Nigerian English (NE), i.e. wahala, abi?, japa, 419, suya, gele, Naija, runs girl, pepper don rest, etc. These things imbibe lived realities into our daily speech. Examples include wahala (trouble, problem, stress), when used to describe collective cultural survival in the face of everyday adversity, and japa (to flee/migrate quickly), when used to describe collective hopes of escape and opportunity. Suya, gele, eba and Naija are reverberating nationalistic identity signifiers, aesthetic identity signifiers, local and international culinary identity signifiers. and shower ground signal people solidarity, city flaneur and culture beat, no wahala, Abi? Taken together, all such utterances are the language constructions and claims of belonging and identity that NE speakers make. According to Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020: 1431) “Nigerianism is not to be regarded as demonstration of inadequate mastery of the English language. Instead it must be considered as potential indications of acculturation, and creative predisposition that are related to first language (L1) and/or mother tongue use”. This also coincides with how our data set portrays this lexis to be not only lacking or marginal, quite on the contrary, it is full of expressive elements.

The examples provided in the above table show how localised lexis such as the Hausa-origin “wahala” (trouble) and “no wahala” (no problem) index the resilience and everyday challenges within the socio-cultural belonging of ethnic communities in response to the research problem of why Nigerian English (NE) is considered a marginalised and substandard form of English. Words like “long leg” (nepotism) denounces corruption, while “419” and “yahoo boy” denounces social identities in perpetrating international frauds. These new words transform the English language into a solidarizing rather than a colonial identity. The English language cannot ideally reflect the whole of Nigerian culture, which is why it is often supplemented with new

coinages and importations derived from Nigerian English lexis as different from native speakers' lexis (Ajewole-Orimogunje 2013).

According to Ogunsiji (2001: 157) new expressions and terms are coming into existence every day to capture the Nigeria linguo-cultural realities. The constant development of new forms indicates the dynamic nature of Nigerian English to incorporate the local linguo-cultural facts. Babarinde and Ahamefula (2020: 1431) affirms that "Nigerianism should not be interpreted as a manifestation of a poor command of the English language. Instead, it is to be considered as potential indications of acculturation, and innovative tendency that is linked to first language (L1) and/or mother tongue use". In essence, these new forms must be recognized for what they are: Nigeria linguo-cultural realities. Kperogi (2007) cautions that "the Nigerian English is not supposed to be regarded as a substandard type of Standard English. Instead it can be regarded as a valid national variety that has been created through our experiences as a post-colonial multilingual nation". According to Igboanusi (2006):

It is quite common in Nigeria to hear people say that they can tell what ethnic background a Nigerian has because of the peculiarities of his/her speech. Although this may not have been the case in most instances, it is an open acknowledgement that there are certain differences in the English language pronunciation patterns of the Nigerians (cited in Babarinde and Ahamefula 1432).

Such considerations authenticate the importance of terms like "senior man"/"oga" (boss, in Pidgin) and "Tokunbo" (second-hand goods, in Yoruba) in resisting marginalisation through creating stratification identities and consumption identities, which aid nation building.

The study's interest in how localized lexis act as a marker of identity is exemplified by words like "abi?" (Yoruba for confirmation), cultivating conversational solidarity, and "japa" (Yoruba for fleeing) reflective of the diaspora in migration discourse. Terms like "adire" and "gele" (Yoruba fabrics) are a marker of indigeneity and femininity in Yoruba fashion, while terms like "suya" (Hausa grilled meat) and "eba" (Yoruba cassava meal) evoke food heritage and culture. Compared to British English, words are semantically modified, such as "dashing" (give freely) and "gisting" (gossip), so more emphasis is put on social-cultural relations. Adegbija (1989) note that these variations of usage described as such include transfer variation, analogy variation, acronym variation, semantic shift or semantic extension, and coinage or neologism. According to Adamo (2007) the current form of the English language in Nigeria is the product of its interaction with the native languages of the locality: an affirmation of the truism that no language can stand alone in a multilingual context.

Sociocultural reference (as in "runs girl" (transactional sex)) indexing gendered survival and hustler dreams in the youth language ("hammer" (to make sudden wealth)) answers the question on how localised NE lexis indexes identities in spoken and written contexts. In written media, "419" challenges stereotypical beliefs about fraud, and in verbal communication, "pepper don rest" (hardship eased, Pidgin metaphor) does the same. Variations like "long leg" criticizes the social survival in political writing and "no wahala" demonstrates a laid-back attitude in informal speech. This premise is corroborated in Adegbija (1989: 166) who contends that lexico-semantic variation in the English language and Nigerian English is an outcome of socio-cultural and linguistic background of the Nigerian users of English.

The question concerning patterns of choice, frequency, variation and context revealing an identity negotiation is exemplified with common youth decisions such as “yahoo boy” in digital settings, negotiating a hustler culture amidst contestation. Forms of “gist” are used in oral social bonding and in written blogs. Aboh (2013: 40) asserts that, though socially negotiated, ethnic demarcation boundaries actually exist in the minds of those who speak them” emphasising how terms like abi? (Yoruba: isn’t it) is a term of conversational solidarity, often used both orally and in social media. Likewise, “japa” is most common in youth language on sites such as Twitter/X, acting out diasporic aspiration but challenging economic realities, since it peaks in usage when discussing the pursuit of improved opportunities in a foreign land. Lawal et al. (2025) confirm that both language and identity are interconnected, and language is the site of identity construction, performance, and negotiation, which can be seen in the contextual differentiation of the term “naija” (informal Nigeria) in pop culture texts to play on nationalistic pride but is challenged in ethnic-specific situations where regional affiliations are at the forefront.

Conclusion

The localised lexis of Nigerian English, as exemplified by such terms as “wahala,” “japa,” “naija,” and “suya,” conclusively opposes the notion of NE as an inferior variety of English by proving to be a flexible instrument of building cohesion and conveying identity in the Nigerian society, which is richly diverse. These phrases, either borrowed into ethnic languages (Hausa and Yoruba) or created in creative semantic re-appropriation, have defined the content of lived experiences: everyday struggles, migration fantasies, and cultural pride, and traverse ethnic boundaries. Digital uses of the word “yahoo boy” manoeuvre around the ambiguities of the youth hustler culture, whereas informal and online usage of pepper don rest expresses persistence in the face of economic adversity and demonstrates the flexibility of NE across registers. The usage of “gist” and its different forms in spoken and written language enhance social coherence and the use of words such as “suya” and “eba” when talking about food brings back a shared cultural culture. These expressions, as they represent the socio-cultural realities of Nigeria, oppose the marginalisation, which makes NE a valid tool of cohesion in a disjointed nation. This paper has pointed out the lexis of NE negotiating and enacting identities, gendered survival in “runs girl” and aspirational wealth in “hammer,” and calls upon a reassessment of the relevance of NE worldwide. In a final conclusion, this discussion places NE as a dynamic linguistic fabric, a mix of diverse Nigerian identities and makes the call to even further examine the region so as to celebrate its role in contributing to a sense of belonging in the face of globalisation adversities.

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