



# **Lexical Borrowing in Nigerian English**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study looked at the extent to which English language is transformed in the Nigerian society. The paper has been restricted to lexical variation of such 'Nigerianness' with particular reference to loanwords and Loanshift and English words whose meaning has been restricted. The data for this work has been drawn from Nigerian newspapers, Nigerian written document which includes literary works, and spoken English of Nigerians have also been observed for the period of the research. The paper analysed in detail the occurrence of such loanwords, from loanwords proper to partial loanwords (those which are not fully accepted into Nigerian English vocabularies) and Loanshift. The paper upheld the view that Nigerian English lexis should be considered a variant as it reflects the cultural as well as the communicative need of the users of English in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Nigerianisms; Nigerian english; Loanwords; Loanshift; Nigerian newspapers.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The study of the spread of English in non-native countries is essentially a post-1960 phenomenon developed from the insights gained by what is

termed "socially realistic linguistic" which attempts a study of language with reference to the social circumstances surrounding the environment to which it is studied. This approach to language study was particularly developed by

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J.R. Firth of London school [1]. The result of such 'socially realistic' linguistic is that language always reflects an environment where it is spoken. The proponents of this theory maintain that linguistic pluralism and diversity were considered as part of multiculturalism and societal interaction.

Varieties of a language develop mostly not in isolation, but as a result of the communicative needs of those who speak it. The standard British English, for example, may serve some of the communicative needs of new environments where English is being used (e.g., Nigeria and Ghana) but by no means all of the needs. It may lack words or phrases that express the cultural background of the people of the new environment that uses it, words which refer to local festivals, local foods, dress, housing, and words which show their family relationship. It may not have words or phrases which express the thoughts and feelings of the people in these nations, those thoughts and feelings which they were able to express adequately in their own languages [2]. These kinds of innovations are inevitable considering the fact that language is an embodiment of a people's culture; this means that language and culture are inseparable.

The use of English which has gone beyond those nations where the British once colonized or where it was once an American possession like West Africa and the Philippines respectively... "English has become the most important international language and is the most commonly taught second and foreign language in the world" [2]. They also outlined characteristics that fit the evolution of the new Englishes, thus:

- It has developed through the education system. Meaning that it is taught as a subject in schools and many cases, also as a medium of instruction in region where languages other than English were the main languages.
- It has developed in an area where English is not the language spoken by the majority of the population.
- It is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it, ranging from administrative, business, literary, parliament functions etc. as well as interpersonal communication.
- It has been domesticated by the languages in its new environment and has been indigenized.

English Language in Nigeria, therefore, brings about a variety of English language that is distinctively Nigerian—referred to by many scholars as 'Nigerian English'. Nigerian English therefore refers to a variety of English spoken by Nigerians which contains aspects of Nigerian culture. English in its new environment (Nigeria) has been domesticated, in that it has acquired socio-cultural elements from the environments with which it has come into contact. Thus, the Nigerian society has brought about an entirely different variety that is easily identifiable and distinguishable from native varieties- British and American varieties [3].

The study of this phenomenon of Nigerian English has evolved as a result of worries expressed by many scholars about the changing patterns of the English spoken in Nigeria. While some scholars regarded this phenomenon with hostility as seen in [4], others considered its evolution as inevitable. The study of Nigerian English, which began in the seventies and became popular around the eighties with scholars like Bamgbose [5], Odumuh [6], Adegbija [7] et cetera, have supported its existence (Nigerian English). Those studies have established that there is a variety of English called 'Nigerian English' which is distinct from any other variety, and which is legitimate in its own right. The variety (Nigerian English) has acquired features of Nigeria's indigenous culture to make it 'Nigerian'.

The features that have been proposed as identifying characteristics of Nigerian English are mostly similar at the levels of phonetics and phonology, syntax, lexis and semantics; discourse, speech acts and stylistics. These features share a lot of common grounds with those of the new Englishes advanced by Kachru [1] and several others. According to the analysts of the Nigerian English situation, Nigerian writers have been the major contributors to the development of Nigerian English. Some of the writers are Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, etc.

Odumuh identified Nigerian English simply as one of the new varieties of English developing all over the world [6]. He also proceeds to provide a theoretical basis to justify its existence – the development of variation studies. That 1987 work goes further to give some features that distinguish Nigerian English from other varieties of English. He categorizes those differences into lexical, semantic, syntactic as well as

phonological usages at both the spoken and written levels.

Jibril argues that Nigerian English does not have to possess a common linguistic feature for it to qualify as Nigerian, since even British English (BE) itself has local variations and dialectal features [8]. This buttresses the point put forward by Odumuh that the features of Nigerian English needs not to be homogenous all over the country.

Jowitt [9] establishes Nigerian English as something real and identifiable and that 'Nigerianisms' is not necessarily the evidence of imperfect learning of English, but instead are possible signs of healthy acculturation and of the creative capacity normally associated with second language learning and usage. While he considers the variation regarding syntax and morphology as an error, he, however, believes that the variation in terms of lexis is an innovation. One thing that needs to be observed is that the phenomenon of Nigerian English sometimes features in the speech of the educated Nigerians.

### 1.1 Loanwords

Every language or language variety which has been in contact with other languages has for some reasons taken over words from those other languages. Most English speakers will be surprised to hear that majority of the words in English have their origin from other languages (like 'French', 'Latin' 'Greek') that English had contact with centuries ago. The term loanword does not seem a very appropriate expression as it implies a 'return to the original owner', whereas the borrowed words have become part of the vocabulary of the language that adopted them. Loanwords (lexical borrowing), nevertheless, can be described as a term that entered into the lexicon of a language as a result of borrowing (transfer or copying). This definition seem uncontroversial, however, certain aspects need to be considered.

First, 'borrowing' has been used in two parallel senses:

- (i) As a broad terminology for all categories of transfer or copying methods; whether as a result of native speaker's absorbing aspects from other languages into the recipient's language, or consequent upon non-native speakers imposing elements of

their native language onto a recipient's language. This broad perspective seems to be, by far, the most prevalent use of 'borrowing'.

- (ii) 'Borrowing', however, has also been used in a more restricted sense "to refer to the incorporation of foreign elements into the speakers' native language" [10].

Of course, it should not be implied that all words from the background languages which are used by people speaking English in the new nations are loanwords. There is usually a whole range of speakers of different socio-economic and educational background having varying degrees of proficiency in the New English; there are those whose knowledge of English is limited, and who feel comfortable speaking in their local languages. When those speakers speak English, they often lack the necessary English vocabulary to express themselves adequately; consequently using words from their local languages to achieve that goal. Those words cannot be considered 'loanwords' since they are haphazardly chosen as the need arises (a blatant case of code mixing). There are other words which are used quite frequently by speakers who have had more English education; such words are often used because such speakers are constrained. Perhaps, such words can be referred to as loanwords in the making.

The genuine loanwords in the New English would, therefore, be those which are recognized by most of the speakers as belonging to 'their variety of English' [2]. There is a tendency that those haphazardly used words from the background languages may slowly become stabilized loanword. On the other hand, loanwords which are in the making may in time become firmly rooted in the New English.

There are areas in the culture of new nations where the emergence of loanwords are mostly found, some of the areas are:

- i. Area of food and cooking: examples- 'Akara', 'Eba', 'Egusi', 'Elubo'
- ii. Dress: examples- 'Agbada', 'Buba', 'Danshiki', 'Kaftan'
- iii. Title and form of address: examples- 'Alhaji', 'Oba', 'Obi', 'Emir'
- iv. Transport: examples- 'danfo', 'molue', 'okada'
- v. Traditional festival: examples- 'Yam Festival', 'Eid-el-Fitr', 'Eid-el-Maulud', 'Ogun Festival'

- vi. Interjection and discourse particle:  
examples- 'a-a', 'abi', 'ko', 'haba!', 'chei',  
'ewo'

Loanwords are always words (i.e. lexemes) in the narrow sense, not lexical phrases, and they are normally un-analyzable units in the recipient language. The corresponding source word in the donor language (e.g., English), by contrast, may be complex or even phrasal, but this internal structure is necessarily lost when the word enters the recipient language.

## 2. METHODS

The study focuses on Loanwords in Nigerian English. Nigerian newspapers, essays and some literary texts were collected and examined as data. These were chosen because they provide good ways of expressing (in written form) the kind of English language spoken or used in the Nigerian society. The simple criteria used was that any newspaper, essay or literary text that we came across within the period of data collection was selected for study.

In all, there were six issues of newspapers (three issues of Daily Trust editions and three Daily Sun editions), two essays and one literary text selected for the study; these were analysed using content analysis method. This method is found very suitable for this type of study which is qualitative. Past observations of some Nigerians using English in their everyday affairs also provided some data for the study.

The sorting of the words were done in line with Jowitt's recommendations [9]. Thus:

1. a) The words have no exact English equivalent, b) It is used in preference to the English equivalents if such equivalents exist (often because the English equivalent is a more extended paraphrase). Examples (Egusi soup, Melon soup).
2. It occurs regularly and systematically in the English of Nigerian users.

Having sorted out the words, they were then classified into regular and partial loanwords. The words were then divided based on the source language and register upon which they appear: (1) Source Language (for example 'Akamu' {Hausa}, 'Eba' {Yoruba})

- (2) Separation based on the register they appear

- (3) Title forms
- (4) The geographical area classification which distinguishes:

- a) The loanwords which are fairly in general use in all parts of the country
- b) Loanwords in general use mainly in either north or south
- c) Loanwords restricted mainly in usage to the ethnic group from whose mother tongue is derived will be supplied where necessary.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical pivot of the phenomenon that produced the new Englishes is that of language variation and change. Weinreich [11] presents a systematic framework for the categorization of the mutual influence and "mixing" that takes place when languages come into contact.

Haugen [12] also gave a systematic way of categorising the lexical contact phenomena into two basic categories - lexical borrowing (which involves imitation of some aspect of the donor language) and creation (lexical items which are entirely native and have no counterpart in the donor language). With the further division of lexical borrowing into "*loanword*" and "*loanshift*". "*Loanword*" referring to that lexical borrowing which all or part of the morphemic composition of the loan derives from external source language, whereas "*loanshift*", on the other hand, refers to the borrowing in which the morphemic composition of the item is entirely native (referring to English in this context), though its meaning derives at least in part from the donor language. This division of *loanword* can also be further subdivided into pure loan words and loan blends. *Loanshift* can also be divided into extension or semantic loan and loan translation.

This model of Weinreich [11] and Haugen [12] as briefly explained above, gives a sound theoretical framework for this study.

## 3. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

As indicated in the methodology, loanwords in Nigerian English can be categorized into two main categories which are based on: 'loanwords proper' and 'partial loanwords'.

### 3.1 Loanwords Proper

This refers to loanwords that are fairly use throughout Nigeria.

**TITLE AND FORM OF ADDRESS**

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Alhaji	Hausa	'Primarily Muslim man who has gone on pilgrimage to Mecca'. It is also used as a title of respect to proceeds personal names
2	Alhaja/ Hajiya	Yoruba/Hausa	'The feminine equivalent of the above'. Alhaja in the south while Hajia in the North.
3	Chief	Igbo	'Denotes traditional title holder'
4	Mallam	Hausa	'Generally refers to teacher in Islamic context'. But often a title of respect for any learned person.
5	Oba	Yoruba/Edo	'Referring to traditional ruler in Yoruba and Edo land'. E.g., Oba of Lagos, Oba of Benin; the plural is Obas.
6	Obi	Igbo	'Traditional ruler in Igbo land and riverine areas'. E.g., Obi of Onitsha.
7	Emir	Hausa	'The overall ruler of Hausa state', E.g., Emir of Kano, Emir of Zazzau.
8	Sultan	Hausa	'The ruler of Muslim jihadist of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century; the paramount ruler of Muslims in the North.

**FOOD**

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Akamu	Hausa	'Corn or millet gruel'; hot pap. It is taken with Milk and (or) sugar, usually for breakfast [9].
2	Akara	Yoruba	'Fried bean cake' (Hausa: Kosai).
3	Eba	Yoruba	'Garri poured and stirred in hot water until it is stiff and Smooth'. It is used as a main dish with soup.
4	Buka	Hausa	'Cheap eating place'; also street restaurant.
5	Egusi	Yoruba	Melon seed used for making soup.
6	Garri	Hausa/Yoruba	'Cassava flour, processed by filtering, drying and frying'.
7	Ogbono	Igbo	'Seeds of Irvigia tree, and the name of soup based on this'.
8	Okro	The three major Nigerian Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba)	'The name of a soup that is derived from the name of the Plant'.
9	Suya	Hausa	'Pieces of red meat grilled on open fire'.

**DRESS**

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Agbada	Yoruba	'A complete outfit that includes flowing gown, shirt and trousers; all of the same material' (same as babbarriga in Hausa).
2	Ankara	Yoruba	'Six yards pieces of material (wax) worn by women'.
3	Buba	Yoruba	'Short loose garment with ample sleeve reaching the elbow worn by women'.
4	Danshiki	Hausa	'Gown with wide armpits reaching the elbow'.
5	Adire	Jukun	Traditional Jukun attire, which refers to tie-dyed indigo cloth.

### TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Eid-el-Fitr	Hausa	'Celebration by Muslim to mark the end of Ramadan fasting'. It is contrasted with Eid-el-Kabir which comes barely two months after Eid-el-Fitr, to which rams are killed for sacrifice.
2.	Maulud	Hausa	'Celebration by Muslims to commemorate the birth of Prophet Muhammad' (S.A.W).
3	Hajj	Hausa	A pilgrimage trip to Mecca during the 12 <sup>th</sup> Month of Islamic Calender (Hijri) with all the attendant activities and sacrifices that are attached to it.
4	New Yam Festival	Igbo	Festival to praise God to mark the end of harvesting period.

### ADMINISTRATION

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Oga	Yoruba	'Used to mark respect for one's superior or master'. (Same as Hausa's 'maigida').

#### 3.1.1 In the North

Mostly used in the North especially where Hausa is L1 or L2.

### FOOD

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Acha	Hausa	'Cereal, fonio, Digitariaexilis, which is mainly grown in the Middle-belt regions of Nigeria'.
2	Burukutu	Hausa	'Alcohol drink made from guinea corn or millet'. Found mostly around Plateau and Gongola areas.
3	Fura	Hausa	'Balls made from millet flour and spices, usually mixed with sour milk'. Food eaten mainly in the North.
4	Tuwo	Hausa	'The Hausa equivalent of 'fufu' made from either rice, guinea corn or maize' (tuwon shinkafa, tuwon dawa etc.)

### RELIGIOUS TERMS

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Grand Khadi	Hausa/Islam	'Senior judge in the penal code system/Sharia system'.
2	Hisbah	Hausa	Islamic organised security system that supervise the observance of the Sharia laws
3	Imam	Hausa	'Denotes the leader in a congregational prayer'. Also extended to mean leader in the Islamic context
4	Khalif/Khalipha	Hausa/Islam	'The descendant of great Islamic scholar' who takes over the throne after his demise.
5	Sharia	Hausa	'Muslim way of life as prescribed by the

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
6	Almajiri	Hausa	Children sent to the cities for the purpose of Qur'anic Studies, who eventually turn to street begging.

### CHIEFTAINCY TITLES

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Sardauna	Hausa	'Traditional title in the North which normally has only one living holder'. Example, Sardauna of Sokoto, Sardauna of Kano etc.
2	Waziri	Hausa	'Ditto as the above', example Wazirin Jema'a.

Also, it should be noted that there are a lot of such traditional titles which with only one live holder, and which are used frequently in the English of Nigerians. For the purpose of this

paper, however, only few would be mentioned. Examples Makaman Nupe, Dallatun Fika, Wanban Kano etc.

### 3.1.2 Mostly used in the south

This is used where Yoruba or Igbo is majorly the mother tongue of users.

### FOOD AND DRINKS

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Dodo	Yoruba/Edo	'Fried plantain slices' especially the ripened one
2	Elubo	Yoruba	'Yam flour used for making Amala'.
3	Fufu	Yoruba/Igala	'A stiff pudding made mostly from cassava and maize'.
4	Moi-moi	Yoruba	'pudding made from ground beans mixed with onion, fish, egg etc.
5	Ogogoro	Middle belt	'Locally distilled gin'.

### TRANSPORTATION

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Danfo	Yoruba	'Van used for passenger transport', commonly found in Yoruba area.
2	Molue	Yoruba	'Bus used for urban transport'
3	Okada	Yoruba/Hausa	'Motorcycle means of public transportation'.E.g, the okadas are many.

### TRADITIONAL TITLES

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Alaafin	Yoruba	Traditional ruler of Oyo in Yoruba kingdom'. It also has only one life holder.
2	Ooni	Yoruba	'Ditto for Ife kingdom'. Apart from this, there are other rulers in both the Yoruba and Igbo kingdoms which have only one life holder.Examples are: Olubadan of Ibadan, Soun of Ogbomoso (Yoruba), Mazi, Eze, (Igbo).

### 3.1.3 Partial loan words

#### FORM OF ADDRESS

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	Baba	Hausa	'Any old man older than speaker', term of respect; also papa. Widespread term for 'father'
2	Titi	Yoruba	'Denoting a girl or young woman'
3	Mama	Hausa	Ditto for Baba, except that this denotes female gender.

#### INTERJECTION AND DISCOURSE MARKERS

S/N	Words as used in PNE	Source	Definition and remark
1	A-a	Yoruba	'Expression of great surprise amounting to disbelief'
2	Abi?	Yoruba	'Mainly in the Yoruba speaking areas meaning 'isn't it'
3	Ba?	Hausa	'Generally in the North like 'abi?' E.g., he did not talk to you ba?
4	Haba!	Hausa	'Expression of surprise or amazement'. Generally in the North, equivalent to 'don't say so' or 'God forbid'.
5	Hei!	Many languages especially in the South	'Generally in the south. Expresses strong surprise and pleasure together'.
6	Chei!	Igbo	'Expression of great surprise' equivalent to 'Kai' in Hausa
7	Ewo!	Igbo	'Expressing surprise and dismay together'.
8	...ko?	Hausa	Ditto to 'ba' above
9	Sha	Yoruba	'A discourse particle appended to a statement'. Scholars like Abraham (1958) translates it as 'merely'. Example: A. When are you submitting your Assignment? B. Tomorrow, sha!
10	Wallahi!	Hausa	Generally in the north, especially among Muslims to mean 'by God'
11	Yauwa!	Hausa	'Expresses strong agreement or approval'

#### 4. LOANSHIFT

Loanshift refers to the extension of meaning of original English terms to cover new concepts or meaning in the new environment [13]. In other words, in loanshifts or semantic extensions, words which already exist in English are imbued

with new meaning which reflect a Nigerian viewpoint. In this category, like in the one before it, no source of the lexical items will be supplied because as explained earlier they are hardly linked to any local language source. The words are:

S/N	Words	Remarks/Explanation
1	Sorry	Exclamation used when someone hurts themselves or suffers a loss. This is used even when it is not the fault of the speaker, which would be inappropriate in Standard English. E.g., I feel <b>sorry</b> for Ribadu because he is a young man...
2	Cheap	Often equated with easy. E.g., the exam was very cheap (meaning the questions were easy).



S/N	Words	Remarks/Explanation
3	Brother	Actual brother or male of the same generation in an extended family. Applied by extension to those of a comparable status in ethnicity, religion, politics etc. It is also used as a title of respect for young men older than the speaker. E.g., the people of Zamfara view it as a visit of a brother to his family.
4	Sister	Respect term for woman of approximately equal age and status to the speaker or any young woman that is older than the speaker; it is equally used to refer to the nurse in the hospital or nuns in the church.
5	Uncle	Literally means father's or mother's brother, but the meaning is extended to cover any person that is older than the speaker, a husband to the speaker's elder sister, or aunt's husband.
6	Durbar	Extended to refer to annual events in traditional Africa. E.g., we could not trace the exact year when the durbar started.
7	Honourable	A title commonly used before the personal names of political office holders including commissioners, parliamentary member, councillors etc. It is often abbreviated as Hon.
8	Son	Extended to cover a form of address to a young man by elderly persons. E.g., come here my son.
9	Beg	To plead, but used in more trivial contexts than in Standard English. Also in the sentence tag, I beg. Do not do this thing o, I beg!
10	Stool	Royal throne. E.g., 'he ascended the traditional stool of the Gbong Gwon at the very trying time in the once peaceful Plateau State' [14].

## 5. SEMANTIC RESTRICTION

This is another type of loanshift but in this case, meanings of original English terms are restricted to a specific idea in the new environment.

S/N	Words	Remarks/Explanation
1	Traffic	Restricted to mean congestions on roads. E.g., the traffic is heavy on that road.
2	Trek	To go on foot I must trek to the market. While some of them resorted to trekking others waited.
3	Hometown	A person's place of origin. ...the status of <i>indigeneship</i> to the members in line with their claim that Jos is their hometown.
4	Lady	Restricted to woman with formal education. While woman applies to both literate and illiterate female adult, the term lady refers to those that are formally educated [15].
5	Hawking	Its meaning is restricted to only selling of items on the road, while in Standard English it has other meanings. E.g., 'Issues of daily hawking tickets to empower people not to take only trade but to erect sheds...' [16].
6	Cyclist	Restricted to refer to riders of motorcycle often for commercial purposes. E.g., in an attempt to avoid the cyclist the car swerved off the road.
7	Chief	Denotes traditional title holder, used commonly in Southern Nigeria. The word is used to proceed personal names as a sign of respect to the holder. E.g., 'While aligning himself with the submission of Chief Fagbeni...' [16].
8	Cooperative	Association aimed at sharing mutual benefits. E.g., 'Cooperatives sharing meat in preparation for the celebration of Christmas...' [17].

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to provide some evidence in the form of lexical borrowing that supports the

existence of Nigerian English as a variety of English language. The study lends support to the claim that when two or more languages come into contact, there is tendency for mutual

influences. It has been shown that some lexical items from the local languages come to be used as part of the lexicon of English spoken in Nigeria. It is therefore pertinent to posit that Nigerian English is greatly influenced by the local languages especially in the area of lexis. It is also important to point out the need for intensified studies like Nigerian English because as one of the major mediums of communication in Nigeria, it deserves serious attention.

Attempt was also made to show the variation of English that is peculiar to Nigerians, even though, scholars have distinguished between variants and error. They, however, maintained that deviations according to lexis are variants, while variations according to syntax and phonology are errors [9].

This paper, however, does not in any way try to justify all the usage of Nigerian English as correct neither does it condemn all of it. It instead shows that there are aspects of it that are unavoidable since language and culture are intertwined.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist. The names of news papers ("Daily Trust", "Daily Sun") used for this research are commonly and predominantly selected in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and news papers because we do not intend to use these news papers as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the news papers rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

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