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Adaptability and Linguistic creativity of Nigerian English in internet memes

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Abstract

This study examines the textual features of internet memes based on the argument that the users of documented forms of a language like Nigerian English can consciously or unconsciously show their knowledge of the language they use, to create new sentences through using the features of a new medium of communication they are exposed to. The study aims at investigating and describing how the textual parts of internet memes portray the unique modes of expression of the variety of English spoken in Nigeria. The objectives of the study include: to ascertain whether the offline documented forms of Nigerian English are attested in the language use by Nigerian internet meme creators; to describe how the linguistic features used by the meme creators adapt to the communicative environment. The corpus of the study is 100 purposively selected internet memes from Nairaland, Instagram and Pinterest. The analysis of data was based on insights from Verschueren (2000) Language Adaptation Theory which proposes that language use is actually the dynamic process of language choice in order to meet communicative needs. Findings show that the memes creators used documented offline forms of the different categories of the features of NE like common core features, peculiar Nigerianism/local idioms, pronoun without antecedent, object in subject position, stative verb used dynamically and wrong usages of preposition. In addition to the offline documented forms, the study found new online features like cramped linguistic structures, use of the particle 'be like' and omission of subject in sentences. These findings are consistent with the proposition of the variationists' view which affirms the existence of a distinct variety of English in Nigeria, with its own subtypes. The study recommends that meme creators should use more of the standard forms of NE, this will help to accord NE the international acceptability it deserves since the posts are likely to draw more attention than a mere written text would do. The study concludes that though some of the memes deploy the non-standard form of NE, they are still meaningful in the context in which they have been used.

Keywords: *Internet memes, Nigerian English, offline usage, pragma-semantic feature, meme creators*

Introduction

It has been established among scholars on language contact that whenever a language leaves its home and settles in another geopolitical region, it must acquire the local colour of its new environment (Awonusi, 2004). The English language bequeathed to us by that the colonial masters is different from the variety in use in Nigeria today. The local colour which the English in use in Nigeria has acquired is known as Nigerian English, henceforth NE. The inability of the English language to perfectly capture aspects of Nigerian cultural experience has led to the conscious and unconscious intrusion of lexical items from the indigenous languages to reflect the Nigerian experience both in offline and online communication.

Nigerian English has generated as a lot of scholarly interest following the publication of the article "English in Southern Nigeria" by Brosnahan in 1958. What Nigerian English is

and what it is not has pitched scholars into two camps: the deviationists' school of thought and the variationists' school of thought. According to the deviationist school, Nigerian English does not exist; and what is referred to as Nigerian English is just a collection of errors and caricature of the Standard British English (SBE) by Nigerians. The variationists' school represent the contemporary viewpoint and a vast majority of scholars like, Awonusi (1987); Odumuh, (1987); Jowitt (1991); Banjo, (1995); Bamgbose (1995); Babatunde (2001); Adegbija (2004); Okoro, (2004); Odebunmi, (2006); among several others, belong here. The output of many scholarly investigations underpins the group's firm assertion that there exists a distinct variety of English use in communication in Nigeria. In spoken and written English in Nigeria, the features are different from the native speaker's variety.

The documented features as a result of the efforts of the above mentioned scholars have shown the world the rich cultural heritage of Nigerians which is expressed in the variant of the English used in communication. A summary of the definition of the term "Nigerian English" by these scholars and also adopted in this study, is that NE is the variety of English different from the native variety used by Nigerians to express their themselves.

This study adopts the variationists' view and avers that a people with a distinct culture like Nigerians must express themselves and their culture in whatever language they use and in whatever platform. They also must avail themselves of the means and technologies available at their disposal in communication. Online platforms are channels through which people from different parts of the world express themselves using different semiotics resources. It is important that the ways people communicate in this new platform be documented as emerging forms of discourses. If this is not done, the human innate ability to create new forms of expression will not fully be described and documented. This is important in order to know how the platforms can help tease out users creative use of language either consciously or unconsciously. Users make the language adapt to the environment. This knowledge and ability to use language exemplifies what Chomsky (1965) termed competence and performance; referring to competence as the native speaker's knowledge of language and innate linguistic knowledge that enables him to produce and understand utterances in his language. Performance is what the native speaker does with this knowledge, that is, how he uses the language in actual situations and contexts as can be seen in the text in the online internet memes studied.

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Change in language occurs, as change is natural. Language, as everybody knows, is dynamic. The advent of the Internet and the rapid development of electronic communication increase the rise of new kind of language. It caused dramatic changes in the language used in the internet. The Internet is widely used in learning of second language all over the world.

Aim and Objectives

The study aims at investigating and describing how the textual parts of the memes investigated in this study portray the unique modes of expression of the variety of English spoken in Nigeria.

The objectives of the study include:

1. to ascertain whether the documented forms of Nigerian English in offline use are attested in the language use by Nigerian internet meme creators;
2. to describe how the linguistic features used by the meme creators adapt to the communicative environment; and
3. to determine if there are new syntactic features different from offline documented features of NE

Statement of the Research Problem

While it is commendable that scholars have done extensive works of the features of NE in offline usages, it is observed that there are no available documented forms of the features of online Nigerian English in internet memes as ways through which Nigerians express themselves. Naturally, people's innate ability to acquire language enables them to consciously or unconsciously use the language to express themselves in whatever communicative environment they find themselves. This study attempts to document the online features of NE in internet memes as novel means through which Nigerians express themselves.

Offline features of documented forms of Nigerian English

Scholars have documented features of Nigerian English in all the divisions of language study. Brosnahan (1958) identified four levels of NE based on the educational levels of the speakers. Adesanoye (1973) used occupation as a criterion, for looking at grammatical and lexical deviations in written Nigerian English. He identified three varieties of written Nigerian English and postulated that the variety three Nigerian English that is, the usage of post graduate class, university lecturers, supervisors, judges, and administrators is the standard Nigerian English. Variety two is the non-standard variety, while variety one is written by semi- illiterate users.

Odumuh (1987) states that code-mixing is another major influence of some features that distinguish Nigerian English from other forms of English language in other parts of the world. These he categorizes into lexical, semantic, syntactic and phonological usages at both the spoken and written levels. Using the theory of linguistic variation, he argues that in contact situation as in the case of Nigeria – a variety of varieties is bound to emerge from the original variety. Awonusi (1987) points out too that NE also exhibits in its syntax 'lexical items with local coloration that is, elements with peculiar Nigerian expressions and flavour'. These include coinages some of which are influenced by transfer from the indigenous languages.

Jowitt (1991) notes that the usage of every Nigerian user is a mixture of standard forms and popular Nigerian English forms, which are in turn composed of errors and error-free usages. According to Jowitt (1991), category shifts such as reclassification of grammatical items, insertion of categories (of parts of speech) and deliberate omissions of some items are some of the features of NE grammar. Such variants are often due to overgeneralisation and interference of the indigenous languages. Bamgbose (1991) supports Jowitt's view that just as English has influenced Nigerian languages, leading to the emergence of new variant of English known as NE, so also have Nigerian indigenous languages influenced English. Jowitt (1991: ix) points out that the English language is a common means of communication for large numbers of people living in Nigeria. He further says that Nigerian English view is something real and identifiable. This is corroborated by Osunbade as cited by Bemigho and Olateju (2006:150) who asserts that "Nigerian English is therefore that variety of English that has developed in the Nigerian non-native English situation and it has distinguishing features manifested at the different levels of language use. These assertions of Nigerian English gained locus in the era of offline discourse. Today with the so many social online platforms, Nigerians use of English is bound to adapt to the feature of each communicative environment.

Commenting on the features of standard Nigerian English and the way it has been nativized, Bamgbose (1995:20-21) posits that NE is replete with: '... introduction of culture-specific vocabulary items, back formation, semantic shift, different verb–preposition combinations and some Nigerian L1-induced syntactic structures'.

Okoro (1986, 2001), use four labels to characterise the features of NE: common-core features (these are the features shared with all other varieties worldwide), peculiar Nigerianisms/local idioms (including modifications of existing native-speaker idioms, and characteristic breaches of the code (violation of the rules of English both at the individual level

and violation that is general). Okoro (2004) reiterates the point he made earlier in 2001 and argues that rather than delineating two different varieties of Nigerian English, as if in a diglossic situation, one should talk about Nigerian English which has standard and nonstandard usages which vary on the basis of education, status and social exposure of the users. Standard Nigerian English has 'core features' which native speakers of English and other countries which use English in one way or another. Thus for an expression to be acceptable as standard Nigerian English syntax, it should not violate any rule of English grammar no matter how illogical or subtle. Instances of violation no matter how widespread should be viewed as breaches of the code rather than as characterizing a legitimate variety of the language. Dadzie (2004) echoes Okoro and stating that any structural or syntactic deviance will be considered an aberration and will be unacceptable.

Omoniyi (2004) maintains that features truly exist in the Nigerian usages at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels, which distinguish it from other national varieties like American English, British English and Indian English. Adegbija (2004:20) points out that English language in Nigeria has been given Nigerian citizenship, just as a domestic servant does what the master wants; English language in Nigeria is now made to do precisely what Nigerians want it to do. English as used in Nigeria has been adapted to meet the socio-cultural needs of the people.

Chiluwa (2010) applies a sociolinguistic and discourse analytical methodology to the study of features and manifestation of NE in computer-mediated communication in informal emails. Using 133 emails as sample, the study shows that NE in informal emails comprises the construction of local thoughts through a range of characteristic properties. Non-standard NE usages like grammatical inconsistencies and misuse of words also existed in the informal emails. Chiluwa (2010) study can be categorised as private discussion between individuals, which are not open discourses as the textual parts of memes studied in this article.

Ohakamike (2016) analysed the Nigerian English used by the students side by side with the standard British English variety. The study found that the Nigerian English used was full of errors and variants. Students' achievement in English language over the years has been a cause of concern to not only the students but to the generality of Nigerians. He suggested that the failure may be on the interference of the mother tongue on the target language coupled with the insistence that English language examination should be marked based on the standard British English.

The above reviews and some others not within the reach of this researcher can be categorised as offline documentation of the features of NE. One overriding finding of all the scholars who have done works on NE is that when languages come in contact, a new variety is bound to emerge. From the above reviews, the features of Nigerian English in offline usage has received measurable attention from scholars, but Nigerian English and its features in online internet interaction like internet memes as one of the new ways of communication have not received the attention of scholars. All the characteristics of the features of NE by scholars can be subsumed under two broad headings, NE comprise standard usages and nonstandard usages.

The increasing internet features for communication provides new modes of communication for its users. With the addition of some expressions that are typically Nigerian to the Oxford Dictionary in January 2020, it is no longer in doubt that there exists a distinct variety of English known as Nigerian English. This study examines the syntactic features of Nigerian English in online communication with focus on internet memes with a view to finding out if the features in the memes are similar to the documented forms as categorised by scholars. The modal affordance of internet such as the use of tools like meme generator in social media platforms has enhance the use of innovations like memes in communication. Memes creators can consciously and unconsciously design memes for different purposes. The internet has also

caused dramatic changes in the language used on the internet. That is why Crystal (2001) declares that technology offers opportunities for linguistic research.

Creative use of language in internet memes

According to Chomsky (1965), humans have the innate ability to know the words of their language and also to have the ability to use same to create novel sentences. New communicative tools necessitated by the internet have open up more avenues for netizens to consciously and unconsciously use language to communicate their feelings, desires and aspirations. By utilising the dual linguistic heritage Nigerians employs language creativity regularly. This creativity is also reflected in internet memes, since memes generally reflect the language used on a daily basis. As rightly observed by Odebunmi (2006:107), the socio-cultural differences that exist between the native speakers of English and Nigerians allow new lexical items to develop.

Silvestri (2014) refers to memetic communications as the use of digital content to spread opinions on issues or individuals and, establish shared relationships and cultures. Taiwo (2018: 320) supports Silvestri's view and points out that the use of memes in online interactions is a growing culture and that "although, they may appear like playful acts in online interactions, memes raise very serious socio-political issues, critique social ills and communicate messages, which fulfil citizens' social responsibilities". Internet meme has been an important part of the social life as it helps in conveying information. Textual patterns in memes rarely follow Standard English rules, but also serve some useful purposes. Memes generally reflect the language used on a daily basis. The creators of memes oftentimes create their own words, that is, new words, metaphors, slogans and fixed phrasal expressions.

Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Shalevska (2018) note that social networks' communicate freely their ideas, thoughts, jokes, funny anecdotes as well as their critiques towards their societies and political leaders in a much more creative way than the traditional. The paper focuses on memes that are a blend of a certain image and a piece of written text, as they are the most popular category. They found that Memes use vernacular English, phrases from specific English dialects, puns and punning riddles, jargon, slang, shortenings and neologisms as well as patterned way of incorrect spelling and multiple, intentional or unintentional grammar and syntax mistakes. They aver that these features make memes a very complex, yet very useful and creative internet communicational tool that, in the recent years, has grabbed the attention of many scholars.

Theory

This study adopts the Language Adaptation Theory by (Verschueren, 2000). The theory holds the view that the process of language use is a process of language choosing and adapting. Verschueren (2000, p. 7) defines pragmatics as "a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistics phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behaviour". Verschueren (2000, p. 55) points out that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons". Three key notions—variability, negotiability, and adaptability, are the reasons why people make choices in language using process.

Variability is the property of language which defines the range of possibilities from which choices can be made. Negotiability is the property of language responsible for the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed form-function relationships, but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. Adaptability, then, is the property of language which enables human being to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable

range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs. (Verschueren, 2000, pp. 59-61).

Communicative context includes language users—utterer and interpreter, the mental world, the social world, and the physical world. The users unwittingly combined the three language functions in the communication. That is, in order to adapt to these new communicative environment, language users (meme creators) have to make choices. They choose the words and channels of communication (they choose memes instead of other semiotic resources).

Source of data and methods of analysis

The data for the study are 100 memes purposively selected from Nairaland, Instagram and Pinterest. These are online sites where most Nigerians posts comments about contemporary events. The memes were grouped according to the similar characteristics they shared before analysis. The memes interweave non-standard and standard usages of NE. For space constraints, only 36 memes are analysed here, because they are representative of the categories of the 100 memes selected. Okoro's (1986, 2004), characterisation of NE is adopted in this paper, though with slight modification. Okoro (2004) categorized the features of Nigerian English into four: Common-core features (shared with other varieties worldwide), peculiar Nigerianisms, local idioms, and characteristic breaches of the code, in this paper we categorize these usages or features of NE into three: common core features, deviations (peculiar Nigerianism/local idioms) and deviances. Insights from LAT, as proposed by Verschueren (2000) complement Okoro's characterisation of the syntactic features of Nigerian English. Verschueren (2000) LAT is essentially about the users of language in a real-life situation, and about the conditions that enable those users to employ semiotics resources effectively and appropriately. The theoretic postulations of Verschueren assist this study to offer further interpretation to the idea that NE is a variant of the English language and can occur in any communicative environment.

Analysis

Common-Core Features of Nigerian English in internet memes

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, common-core features are features which cut across all the varieties of the English language spoken across the globe. They are used in native speakers' variety (L1), L2 variety and in the foreign language variety. Some minor and major sentences all fall under the common-core category. Here are a few examples of the memes for phatic communication (common core features) which have Nigerian English in them:

Nigerian English in memes used for phatic communication

Phatic communication is verbal or non-verbal communication that is used to maintain social relationship. The utterances in the memes are phatic expressions which have socio-pragmatic function and are used in everyday conversational exchange. They follow the syntactic rules of sentence formation in English. According to Verschueren (2000), the meme creators adapt the language use to the communication environment to express themselves. The expressions are region-neutral. The spelling conventions, stringing of words do not break any grammatical rules. Examples:



Figures 1, 2, 3,

Okoro (2004) common core features include minor sentences and some major sentences. The minor sentences are those which do not have the basic sentence components and cannot be analysed the way a full-fledged sentence can. The major sentences are further divided into simple, compound, multiple etc.

The textual parts of the memes in figures 1, 2 and 3 are minor sentences. In figure 1, the meme creator shows engagement in social relationship on phone. The conversation is between two interlocutors. The initiating text ‘Good morning sir’, and the seeming response from the interlocutor ‘How are you today’ are all phatic communicative elements. The two texts could also be from the same man. In all the memes, the creators either consciously or unconsciously weave the three communicative functions which according to Verschueren enable language users in different domains to use language successfully. The text of figure 2 is an utterance that can be uttered by Nigerians and maybe any lover of Nigeria who is not a Nigerian. The text of figure 3 is phatic communication. The meme creators in all the memes have unlimited list of choices and the choices arbitrarily made performs the communicative role which the users intend to establish—using language to foster social relationship. The textual elements are examples of common core features which are attested also in offline documented forms of NE as have been documented by scholars. The online adds multimodal elements to the text which appeals to sight.

Nigerian English in simple sentences memes



Figures 4, 5, 6,

The textual parts of these memes (figures 4, 5 and 6) are simple questions which are also region-neutral. These choices could be deliberate or in deliberate. They satisfy the communicative needs of the users. Figure 4 is an interrogative question which does not have regional coloration, Figure 5 is an emphatic question, which can be converted to an interrogative question if the ‘do support’ is added to it, it can be changed to ‘did you ask me a question?’ Figure 6 is a simple expression of joy which can be said by anybody who speaks English.

Nigerian English in cramped linguistic structures memes



Figures 7, 8, 9 (You don't mean it, I don't believe it, enough of that rubbish)

Apart from the documented features of Nigerian English, online meme creators also use cramped linguistic structures (words joined together as in the examples above) to communicate. This exemplifies (Verschueren, 2000) notion of Negotiability where language user's choices are not mechanically made but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. The structure of figures 7, 8 and 9 displays creativity of the meme creators. The stringed words are declarative utterances. This innovation illustrates Alo's (2006:26) assertion that coinages are newly coined words and expression in English resulting from the prevailing socio-linguistic factors in Nigeria. These coinages which appear as cramped linguistic structures express the meanings of the language user and their choice of how to express themselves. Verschueren (2000) says that negotiability enables users to make choices based on highly flexible principles and strategies, the creators of these memes' choice to use these structures show creativity enabled by the social media platform. The words of the structures though not distinct still make meaning the reader. The words are stringed together as in rapid speech. The reader is able to make out the meaning through sight and sound. The use of one of the linguistic items naturally signals the use of the next item. As a result of linguistic competence and performance, the meme creators are able to string words that make meaning to the reader. The adaptability of the meme creators to the modal tools available online for netizens to express themselves has enabled the meme creators to express themselves.

Deviations (peculiar Nigerianism/local idioms in internet memes)

Expressions that are typically Nigerian that have not violated the rules of grammar but are different from how the native speaker would say them are categorised as deviations. That is, deviation from the Standard British English. Utterances that are peculiar Nigerian and local idioms are also attested in the memes used by Nigerians for communication in online platforms. The utterances and expressions serve the purpose of the immediate communicative needs of the users. They are distinctively Nigerian and do not violate any grammatical rule. Examples from the data are:

Direct transfer from the local language/ Interlanguage



Figures 10, 11, 12,

Loan words from the indigenous languages filter into the language use by Nigerians in offline usages; this is also attested in online platforms. This is observable in the meme creators of figure 10, 11 and 12, they deployed loan words 'Egusi', 'Suya' and 'bad belle' from the language repertoire of Nigerians. Language users have a range of choice to choose from, this equates to variability. 'Egusi' is the Nigerian equivalent for 'melon'. 'Suya' is a Hausa word referring to roasted meat. The coinage 'Bad belle people' in the figure 12, literally translates to 'ndi afo ojoo' a direct transfer from the Igbo language in Nigeria. The use of it in the sentence does not in any way break grammatical rule. 'Bad belle' is functioning as an adjective modifying the noun 'people'. The use of these words cut across the various ethnic groups in Nigeria and does not in any way impede meaning. Coinages, though similar to loanwords,

function as a sort of colloquialism that is spoken in English but has a unique cultural meaning. These are also prolific in Nigerian English.

Nigerian Local idioms in internet memes



Figures 13, 14, 15

The idioms of figure 13, 14 and 15 can be interpreted respectively as: ‘one should know one’s ability before undertaking any venture’, ‘anyone scared of success cannot go far’ ‘see the truth and not be fooled’.

One of the ways through which the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria is displayed in speech is the use of idioms and proverbs in offline and online usages. The idiomatic expressions used in the memes though not the way the native speakers of English would say them, obeyed the rules of syntax, and are grammatically correct expressions. Nigerian languages interweave idiomatic expressions and proverbs in usage. The idiomatic expressions in the memes of figures 13 and 14 reflect the culture of the Igbos, who use idiomatic expressions a lot in speech. The loan word ‘eba’ in figure 14, is a staple food in Nigeria made from cassava. The idiomatic expression of figure 15 can be said to be ethnic neutral. It is a common idiom used by Nigerians especially in informal situations to reprimand one. The choice of the loanwords either consciously or unconsciously chosen portrays the culture of Nigerians. As Ogunsiji (2004:87) rightly observed Nigerian English has its own peculiarities *including idiom usage* which are conditioned by the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. The choices made by the meme creators have enabled them to achieve their communicative needs.

Deviance (nonstandard usages of NE)

The use of pronoun without antecedent



Figures 16, 17, 18

The use of pronoun without antecedent is similar to using words that are not specific in communications. The pronoun ‘They’ in the memes of figures 16, 17, and 18 are honorific uses which is an offshoot of transliteration from the Yoruba expression ‘wọn ti bẹrẹ’, and Igbo variant ‘ha ebidogo ọzọ’ (they have started again) where the referent of ‘wọn’ in Yoruba language, is just a person, but older than the speaker. In Igbo, it is a plural marker just like in English. In figure 18, in the context of use it refers to a single person. This is a feature of offline feature of Nigerian English, instead of the 3rd person singular pronoun the 3rd person plural pronoun is used for a person.

The omission of preposition, wrong use, and redundant preposition

Okoro (2004) notes that in Non-standard Nigerian English usage, prepositions are wrongly used in three ways. These are: the omission of a preposition, the use of the wrong preposition and the use of a redundant preposition. These are observable in the memes below:



Figures 19, 20, 21

The lower text of figure 19, has the omission of the preposition ‘in’ in the expression, ‘look at me and look at you, am I – your class?’ The correct expression is ‘look at me and look at you, am I in your class?’ In figure 20, we observe the use of a wrong preposition ‘in’ in place of ‘on’. People live ‘on’ street not ‘in’ street, as is seen in the meme. There is the use of redundant preposition (for) in the meme of figure 21, ‘why are you requesting for my assistance now’, the correct expression is ‘why are you requesting my assistance now?’ Not ‘why are you requesting for my assistance now’.

Omission of articles/ wrong articles/ redundant articles in NE on internet memes



Figures 22, 23, 24

The meme of figure 22 has the omission of the indefinite article ‘a’ before the noun ‘boyfriend’. The correct structure is ‘so you have a boyfriend ...’. There is the use of wrong article in meme 23, the user used ‘A’ in place of ‘An’, ‘when you are at the strip cub and a ugly ...’, the correct expression is ‘when you are at the strip cub and an ugly ...’. In the ‘b’ part of meme 24, instead of ‘you can’t even pillow fight with your partner’, the user chose to omit the 2nd person subject pronoun (you), giving the reader the structure ‘can’t even pillow fight with your partner’. The missing ‘you’ is retrievable from the context because of the possessive ‘your’. The ‘c’ part has the use of the redundant article ‘the’ before ‘both’. The choices made by the meme creators have aided them to pass across meanings through the Nigerian variant of English.

Reduplication

Nonstandard NE also includes the use of reduplication elements and tautological lexis common in Nigerian indigenous languages. Examples:



Figures 25, 26, 27

The textual part of figure 25 meme exemplifies tautology in NE, ‘short knickers’, the meme creator could either use only ‘short’ or ‘knickers’. In spite of the tautology, the meaning is retrievable. Reduplication of adjective is observable in meme 26 in the second sentence, where the meme creator deployed ‘big big’ to qualify the noun ‘grammar’. The right word/phrase to replace ‘big big’ can be ‘highfalutin words’. This shows the influence of the mother tongue of the meme creator in his/her choice of words. Most Nigerian languages reduplicate adjectives in speech. The meme creators may have made their choices unconsciously. In figure 27, there is the repetition of ‘repeat’ and ‘again’, in the context either word would have served.

The use of object in subject position



Figures 28, 29, 30

In standard British English, the first person object position occupies the object position, and is not used to begin sentences, but in these memes (figures 28, 29 and 30), they have been adapted and used as NE to begin the above constructions. This phenomenon is also part of the documented features of NE by scholars, where in some Nigerian indigenous languages there is no distinction between the 1st person subjective pronoun and the 1st person objective pronoun in sentential construction. The documented forms are speakers’ use of double subjects, e.g. ‘Me I don’t like him’, instead of ‘I don’t like him’.

Wrong use of the particle ‘be like’



Figures 31, 32, 33

Literally the use of ‘be like’ signals comparison, but in the offline usages of some Nigerians, it is as pause fillers in different contexts. This is also attested in online usage as exemplified in figures 31, 32 and 33. The use of ‘be like’ in all the memes are seemingly used as pause fillers by the meme creators, a direct transfer of the offline usage. In these memes, the context of usage shows a different meaning. In meme 31, it indicates certainty, where the user is sure of his age. When ‘be like’ is preceded by any form of the verb to be, it is used to mean ‘to say’ or ‘to think’ used to precede an approximate quotation or paraphrase as seen in meme 32. In figure 33 it is used as a mild intensifier.

Use of Stative verb dynamically



Figure 34, 35, 36

The use of stative verb as if they are action in progress is another feature of NE as documented by scholars in offline usage. Figures 34, 35 and 33 exemplify this. Stative verbs are verbs that denote perception such as ‘see’ and ‘hear’; verbs of cognition such as ‘understand’ and ‘know’. Dynamic verbs denote activity; in other words, they are verbs that express physical actions and they do occur in the progressive aspect. In these memes, the verbs respect, see, and understand have been used dynamically. The choice could be deliberate or indeliberate, they have been chosen and adapted by the users to communicate their intentions.

Adaptability of NE in internet memes

According to Verschueren’s LAT (2000), contextual correlates of adaptability probably involve all the constituents of the communicative context with which linguistic elements have to be inter-adaptable. The constituents which are inter-adaptable contain: language users, mental world, social world and physical world. Aspects of physical, social, and mental reality get “activated” by the utterer and interpreter in their respective choice-making practices and that is how they become part of language use as elements with which the making of choices is inter-adaptable and their meanings. In speech communication, the contextual aspects of the physical, social, and mental world play a role in the process of producing and interpreting language. In the following parts, linguistic adaptation to the mental world, to the social world and to the physical world of the memes would be discussed respectively.

The adaptation of internet memes to the physical world

The memes are not repeated here but the sections where they are discussed are mentioned. Verschueren (2000) points out that the physical world is a physical and visible context, including specific subject, object, time, space and topic elements. As observable in the memes, the physical world is clearly represented in the memes. The memes in the first category 6.1.1 used for phatic communication are so adapted online to meet the communicative needs of fostering social relationship, also the simple utterances in 6.1.2 show and exhibit the social world where language users pass across pieces of information. The cramped linguistic structures in 6.1.3 have been adapted the way they appeared to show the creativity of the users which have been enabled by variability (range of possibilities from which choices can be made), the meme creators’ have to choose from the language repertoire of the English language and Nigerian languages in some cases. The structure of the textual parts of some memes in the study follows the structure of sentence formation of English. The memes under deviation and deviance have been necessitated by the sentence formation rules of the mother tongue of the users. In all, the choices are adapted to pass across the intended meanings of the meme creators.

The adaptation of internet memes to the social world

The social world mainly includes social settings or institutions or community-specific communicative norms that have to be observed. In addition, culture is also one of the key contents in the social world. Construction of NE in internet memes is not restricted to the meme creator and the supposed reader. It also includes others, that is, a process which often involves

foregrounding of properties which position people in a social world (Verschuieren, 2000, p. 91). The affordance of the internet as a social platform have enabled the users to meaningfully imbibe and exhibit the cultural nuances of Nigeria in the memes. Examples from the data are the memes under 6.2 (Deviations—peculiar Nigerianism/local idioms in internet memes) and 6.3 (Deviance (nonstandard usages of NE)). Sometimes in communication, language users (un)intentionally pass across meanings that can be assessed directly, through implication or through inferences. The adaptation of language to the social world provides the prescribed norms and principle for language users.

The adaptation of internet memes to the mental world

The mental world mainly refers to the mental factors of the persons in communication such as motivation, intentions, and wishes. The textual parts of the memes represents desires and intentions all with the aim to communicate. The different categories of the memes are all done with different intentions, some to create social relationship (the memes under phatic relationship), some to pass across information.

Findings and Discussion

The study found that common core features which are region neutral, deviations—usages that are peculiar Nigerian that do not break any grammatical rule and local idioms with Nigeria coloration are offline documented features of NE that are also attested in internet memes. Use of pronoun without antecedents, wrong use, redundant and omission of preposition, reduplication, omission of articles, wrong articles, object in subject position, use of stative verb dynamically are the different forms of deviance found in the textual parts of internet memes, these are also documented offline usages. Though these deviant usages out rightly violate the grammar of English they are mostly transliteration of the indigenous Nigerian languages to English. The forms have arisen from the competence and performance necessitated as a result of the dual linguistic heritage of most Nigerians who in addition to one's mother tongue have been exposed to the English language in one way or another. Internet platforms help new coinages in the memes to spread and gain acceptability. The new form of NE found on internet memes is the use of the particle 'be like'. This is also observable in the speech of the younger generation in the country. So, it is not uncommon for it to also appear on internet platforms in the memes. The study also found the use of cramped linguistic items probably deployed by the meme creators to represent rapid speech. There is also the omission of subject (figure 24) in some cases which can be retrievable from the context. The utterances in some memes which are peculiar Nigerian and which do not violate any grammatical rules of English foreground the fact that NE is not full of errors as maintained by the deviationists group. These findings are consistent with the proposition of the variation school of thought which affirms the existence of a distinct variety of English in Nigeria, with its own subtypes. The textual parts of the memes adapt to the users' communicative needs both for enacting social relationships and for other communicative needs. The three major communication skills as pointed out by Verschuieren (2000) are mutually deployed by internet meme creators.

Conclusion

Nigerian English does exist in offline and online usages. These different platforms of usage have unique affordances which language users can use to show creativity. This foregrounds the point that the innate ability for humans to acquire and use language can be both conscious and unconscious behaviour, and can be deployed in any communicative environment. The use of new platforms to express ones feelings clearly shows humans innate ability to adapt to new electronic communication environment. Some choices are (in)deliberate as a result of the communicative context.

The offline documented features of NE is adapting to the technological niche and is responding to the pressures imposed by online platform. With new technology, there is bound to be novel writing conventions as exemplified partly by the cramped linguistic structures used by some meme creator. The standard usages in the memes which have met the criteria for the identification of standard usages and which have international intelligibility should be encouraged. The pseudo-listener of the ideas in the textual parts of the memes should rest on the linguistic structures and context to identify the intent of the communicators through making the best interpretation of the texts. The memes under 'deviance' also clearly express the peculiarly Nigerian experience and perspective in ways that do no serious damage to Standard English structure or general intelligibility. What the meme creators have displayed is in consonance with Skuttnabb-Kaugas (1975) demonstration that the pragmatic consequences of the presence of many languages in a particular context involve coinages and neologisms. When Nigerians speak their indigenous languages, they communicate naturally with little or no errors in speech. The many inconsistencies in English could be the reason for some of the errors found in the memes under 'deviance'.

The fact remains that the various cultural and socio-linguistic thought of Nigerians cannot be adequately expressed in the standard form of the English language; hence the different derivations, innovations and improvisation to suit the situation and context of usage of the language. As noted by Kperogi (2007), Nigerian English is not bad or substandard English; it is a legitimate national variety that has evolved out of our experiences as a post-colonial, polyglot nation. The study recommends that meme creators should use more of the standard forms of NE, this will assist to accord NE the international acceptability it deserves since the posts are likely to be exposed to more audience than a mere written text would do. Since there is mutual intelligibility in the textual parts of the memes, Nigerian English use on the internet should be accorded global acceptability. The forms discovered in this research are proposed to be included in a holistic documentation of internet language forms especially in Nigeria; where the discourse in what constitute Nigerian English has generated so much debate from scholars from diverse fields.

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