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Influence of L1 on Spoken English in Nigeria: An Assessment of Obolo Vowels

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Abstract

This study examines the Obolo vowel influence on the spoken English in Nigeria. The random sampling technique was used to select twenty (20) subjects from Obolo. A story taken from the Jehovah Witness' watch tower was given to the subjects to read, and their utterances were recorded. A total of fifty words (50) were selected from the utterances of the subjects. Elements of pure vowel, diphthongs and triphthongs were investigated to ascertain if Obolo speakers of English delete and substitute L2 vowel in course of speaking English. The theoretical thrust for this study is Interlanguage theory. The analysis shows that English pure vowels were substituted with the available Obolo vowels in their repertoire. The central vowel such as /ʌ/ was replaced with the back counterpart /ɔ/. Also, the study revealed that the front vowel /i/ and /u/ were deleted by the Obolo speakers of English while pronouncing words like "day" /dei/, "go" /gəu/ and the vowel /a/ was substituted for the schwa sound /ə/ in words like "care" /keə/ and "here" /hiə/ realizing the words as /kia/ and /hia/.

Key: Obolo Vowel, English in Nigeria, L1 Influence, Substitution, Deletion

Introduction

Many speakers of English in Nigeria are mostly bilinguals since they have acquired their mother tongue before learning English as a second language. In a second language learning situation, it is certain that L1 influences the L2. This situation is not different in Nigeria as L2 speakers of English in Nigeria manifest elements of their mother tongue while using English and it is the reason for different regional varieties and sub-varieties of English in Nigeria. For instance, Hausa English, Igbo English, Yoruba English, Obolo, English, Tiv English, and other sub-varieties. Very many speakers of

English as a second language in Nigeria tend to insert, delete and substitute the available sound segments in their repertoire while using English. Eka (1996) opines that Yoruba speakers of English insert the back vowel /u/ in between the onset consonant cluster of [br] while realizing the word "bread", while the Hausa speaker of English would realize the word "people" as "feofle", substituting the voiceless bilabial /p/ for the voiceless fricative /f/. Nkereke (2011) also notes that the Ibibio speakers of English in Nigeria substitute the lateral sound /l/ for the approximant /r/ while realizing



the word “river” and “love” respectively.

The phonological structure of Nigerian indigenous languages are not the same with that of the English, this also pose problem for the English speaker as a second language in Nigeria. Over the years, linguistics have concentrated more efforts in studying Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv, Edo, Ibibio, Ffulde and Annang varieties of English leaving behind many other indigenous Nigerian languages unattended. Obolo is one of the many languages with paucity of scholarly works in Nigeria. Obolo falls under the lower cross family languages of the Niger Kordofanian, Benue-Congo phylum (Luke, 2015). There are four dialects of Obolo: Ekede, Ataba, Asarama, and Unyeada dialects. The Obolo are a particular group of people that occupy the coastal area of the Southern part of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. At present, Obolo speakers are in Andoni Local Government Area of Rivers State and the Eastern Obolo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. According to Ejit-uwu (1991), the term Obolo means the language and the people and so literally represents both the language and the people. Since Obolo speakers of English do so as L2 speakers definitely, they may delete, insert or substitute the available vowel in Obolo sound system while using English during conversation so, the present study investigates the influence of Obolo vowels on the Nigerian Spoken English.

Obolo Vowel System

According to Faraclas (1984), there are 12 vowel sounds in Obolo. The

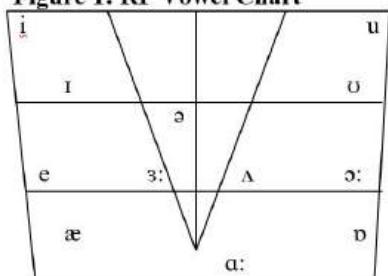
twelve phonemic sounds in Obolo are divided into six short and their long vowel counterparts. The sounds are: /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/, /o/, /ɔ/. Faraclas (1984) asserts that to form long vowels, one monophthong must be doubled. For instance, /aa/→→ /a:/, /ii/→→ /i:/, /uu/→→ /u:/, and so on. Furthermore, the sources state that long vowels are relatively rare in Obolo, and in fast speech, it is usually shortened to the length of an average short vowel. Sometimes, it occurs in syllables closed by /k/ and /ŋ/ in Obolo. However, stress may cause vowels to lengthen in Obolo, and lengthened vowels caused by stress are also maintained in fast speeches. Faraclas (1984) opines that in syllables closed by nasal consonants, vowels are automatically nasalized. For instance, *māniin ūkañ*: ‘I will quench the fire’ is pronounced [mā:niŋ ūkan] in fast speech, the /a/ of the ‘ma’ is lengthened due to the fact that ‘ma’ is stressed, while /ii/ in ‘niin’ is shortened. All the sounds are nasalized by the following nasal consonants. Furthermore, Faraclas (1984) notes that Obolo vowels do not vary greatly in quality; however, /e/ is a variant of /ɛ/, but it is pronounced /e/ when long or in syllables lengthened by stress. In terms of quality, vowels vary dialectally.

Emiya (2016) opines that all the front vowels in Obolo have the features of un-roundedness such as /i/, /i:/, /e/, /e:/, while the back vowels like /u/, /u:/, /o/, /o:/, /ɔ/, /ɔ:/ are rounded vowels. Both the long and short vowels occur mainly in closed syllables. Emyia (2016) notes that Obolo has vowel harmony

which starts from the right to the left and also, a noun root with /a/ does not take in /e/ in the prefix. The vowels of Standard British English (SBE) are classified into three types: the monophthongs, diphthongs and the triphthongs. There are twelve (12) monophthongs (pure vowels), eight (8) diphthongs while the triphthongs are five (5) in numbers (Eka, 1996; Eka and Udofot, 1996). On the other hand, Faraclas (1984)

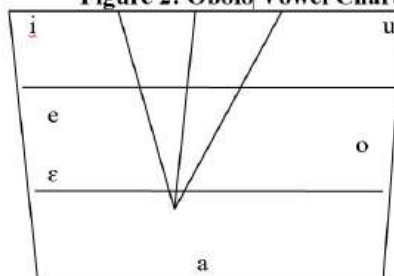
opines that Obolo has 6 pure vowels and no diphthongs. Typical Nigerian speaker of English draws a lot from their native language into their spoken English, Obolo speakers of English are not exception. The following figures adopted from Adetugbo (2004) and Luke (2015) gives a guide to the English and Obolo vowel sounds respectively.

Figure 1: RP Vowel Chart



Adopted from Adetugbo (2004)

Figure 2: Obolo Vowel Chart



Adopted and modified from Ebirien (2014)

Figure 1 above shows /u/ and /o/ are the only vowels in the open position. Obolo has no equivalents of RP /ɪ/ and /ʊ/. Also, there are no front or back vowel distinctions of RP /æ/ and /ɑ:/ respectively. Figure 2 entails that the RP central vowels /ʌ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/ are not present in the Obolo vowels system. Since Obolo vowel chart has no central vowels, /a/ is substituted for /ə/ while /o/ is used in place of /ʌ/ and /ɜ:/ respectively.

English Vowel System

English vowels are produced with sustained air flow, and without audible obstruction in the speech organs at the time of production.

There are twenty (20) vowel sounds otherwise known as monophthongs and eight glides (diphthongs) in English. For this study, the vowels /æ, e, i, ɒ, u/ were utilized. The front half open vowel /æ/ occurs freely at the onset position of words in English with voiced and voiceless sounds, for example, sat /sæt/ - CVC, hand /hænd/ CVCC. The English front vowel /e/ occurs in a closed syllable at initial and medial positions in words like, egg /eg/ - CV and bed /bed/ - CVC. Also, it occurs with nasals as in "embassy", fricatives as in [effort], laterals - [elbow] and plosives as in [ebb]. The vowel /e/ does not occur at the final positions in any English word.



The front vowel /i/ occurs with voiceless and voiced consonant sounds of English words both at the onset and at the medial positions in English words. For instance, at the onset position: /i/ 'it' /it/, "initial" /iniʃəl/. Medial position: /i/ "sit" /sit/, "did" /did/. When the long vowel /i:/ is enclosed in voiced consonants, it is shorter; for example bit /bit/, while the reverse is the case for words like, "sea" /si:/, "plea" /pli:/. The front vowel /i/ can also feature very well at the medial position with different classes of consonants. For example, "sit" /sit/, (fricative), "did" /did/ (plosive), "chin" /tʃin/ (affricate), "line" /lain/ (lateral), and "win" /win/ (approximant). The back vowel /ɒ/ occurs at initial and medial positions as in off /ɒf/ - CV, cod /kɒd/ - CVC.

Diphthong in English are classified into closing diphthong /ɔi, au, ei/, and centering diphthongs /iə, uə/ for the purposes of proper description. The glide diphthong /au/ occurs in all word positions as in "how" /au/ - V, "bound" /baund/ - CVCC, about /əbaut/ - VCVC. On the other hand, the diphthong /uə/ occurs at words medial and coda positions as in "sure" /ʃuə/ - CV, "queer" /kuə/ - CV. Furthermore, the diphthong /ɔi/ appears flexible and is found in all word positions as in "oil" /ɔil/ - VC, "toy" /toi/ - CV, "choice" /tʃɔis/ - CVC. The diphthong /ei/ begins from the low quality and moves towards the midpoint of the /i/ as in "eight" /eit/ - CV, "say" /sei/ - CV, "said" /seid/ - CVC, while this phoneme /iə/ begins with front closed vowel with a spread lips and moves to the central half close /ə/ with lips in neutral

position as in: "ear" /iə/ - V "hear" /iə/ - V, "bear" /biə/ - CV.

Review of Related Literature

Apeli and Ugwu (2013) study the phonological interference in the spoken English performance of the Izon speaker. They emphasized that the level of interference is not based on the systematic differences that exist between the two languages (English and Izon), rather as a result of the interlanguage factors such as the level of individual's interaction in and with the L1, the level of education, and the access to oral English lessons while in school. In describing the contrasts, Apeli and Ugwu (2013) focus on some elements in English which are not in Izon and vice versa.

Izon language does not have the English fricatives /ʃ, ʒ, θ, ð/, and the affricatives /tʃ, dʒ/. Also, there exist differences between the Izon lateral /l/ and that of the English. Izon has a tap /f/ and no English approximant /r/. The Izon have no /θ/ and /ð/ dental fricatives. The sounds /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ are part of the phonemes that constitute problems for the Izon speaker of English. Since the phonemes are not found in Izon, /s/ is substituted for /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ and /z/ is substituted for /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ respectively.

The study concludes that the level of interference the Izon speaker of English exhibits in their spoken English is not as a result of the differences that exist between both language systems, rather as a result of interlanguage factors such as the level of the individual's interaction in and with the L1, the level of



education of the speaker and the access of the speaker to oral English lessons while in school. Also, The English language teacher needs to be aware of the differences in the phonological systems of the first and the second language which can cause interference (Apeli and Ugwu, 2013). Oshodi and Owolewa (2020) establish that Nigerian English emerged when Nigerian speakers of English who are already acquainted with the knowledge of their mother tongue attempted to learn English as a second language, consequently, issues like interference, errors, mistakes, transfer, and so on, combine to form what is referred to in L2 literature as interlanguage. According to Oshodi and Owolewa (2020), the most distinguishing feature of a variety of a language is usually the accent. Nigerian speakers of English use different accents based on their tribe and level of educational attainment. For instance, the Yoruba accent differs from the Igbo, Hausa and Efik accent. Oshodi and Owolewa (2020) point out that Nigerian English possesses some features manifested at the phonological lexico-semantic, grammatical and discourse levels which are indigenous transfer from Mother Tongue. This study concludes that educated Nigerians speak a form of English that is close to Standard British English though, lexical, and semantic differences. It is worth knowing that all the forms referred to as Nigerian English emanated from a combination of features of MT of individual Nigerians. Every L2 speaker comes up with a peculiar combination of linguistic and non-

linguistic factors which is a clear case of interlanguage.

Nigerian English has been described as a variety that is known to have varieties within a variety (Eka, 2005). This prompted the classification of Nigerian English into sophisticated Nigerian English (henceforth NigE), educated NigE, basic NigE and nonstandard NigE. From the ethnolinguistic lines, there are Hausa English, Igbo English, Yoruba English, Edo English, and many more other sub-varieties. These first languages in Nigeria manifested in the spoken NigE speech. Eka (2005) notes that the basic nonstandard and the ethnolinguistic varieties are problematic in nature as speakers in these sub-varieties show distinction between pairs like “seat” and “sit”, “port” and “pot”, “fool” and “full”, “cart” and “cat”. He points out speakers in these varieties coalesce vowels such as: /i:/ and /ɪ/ as /i/, /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/ as /ɔ/, /a:/ and /æ/ as /a/, /u:/ and /ʊ/ as /ʊ/ respectively. Eka (2005) concludes that in NigE variety, long sounds – diphthongs and triphthongs are rare, that is because the speakers monophthongize them.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, interlanguage was utilized as the theoretical framework. The term ‘interlanguage’ was first proposed by Larry Selinker in 1972. He stated that interlanguage is a linguistic system that is used by the second language (L2 henceforth) learners influenced by the Mother tongue (L1). Selinker refers to interlanguage as L2 systematic knowledge independence of both L1



and L2. According to Frith (n.d), any utterances produced by the L2 learner that is not identical to those produced by the native speakers of the Target Language (TL hereafter) and cannot be translated exactly from the native language of the learners is known as 'interlanguage'. Atoye (1994) sees interlanguage as the linguistic system used by learners or users of a second language. Selinker introduced this theory based on the fact that its linguistic system differs from the Target Language (TL one being learned) and that of the Source Language (L1 the learner's own mother tongue).

Furthermore, he notes that the grammar of any interlanguage (IL henceforth) is a mixture of both the target language and non-target language forms, which means it is a mixture of correct and incorrect forms. IL is the type of language produced by L2 learners who are in the process of acquiring or learning a new language. In the process of interlanguage, some issues emerged as the consequences of a transfer between the first language acquisitions into the target language acquisition. These issues include errors, mistakes, learning strategies and fossilization, (Amalia Arnis and Samsul (2012). Errors and fossilization are the influence from either the first language (mother tongue) or lack of reinforcement (Savoille-Troike, 2006).

Research Methodology

Twenty (20) subjects were randomly selected from Obolo ethnic group

using educational qualification from level 200 undergraduate to Master of Art Degree holders in English and Linguistics respectively. The researcher pre-informed the subjects his intention of recording their utterances for research purposes before engaging the subjects. A story taken from the Jehovah Witness' watch tower pamphlet produced in the year 2000 was given to the subjects to read, and their utterances were recorded. A total of fifty words (50) were selected from the utterances of the subjects. The researcher played back the audio recorded utterances of the subjects and fifty words were selected for analysis. The words selected for data analysis were divided into three categories of pure vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs. The data analysis focuses on substitution of Obolo vowel and the deletion of English vowel during pronunciation of the items selected for this research. Daniel Jones' (1969) vowel system of transcription was used as a reference point for Received Pronunciation (RP) while analyzing the Obolo vowel influence on the English words.

Research Analysis and Findings

For the purpose of analysis, data collected for this research was divided into three groups: pure vowels, diphthongs and triphthongs. The table below displays the vowel sounds of English, word, expected sound, percentage, and the realized sounds by the informants.



Table 1: Substitution of Pure Vowels

Sound	Gloss	Expected Sound	%	Realized Sound
/i:/	eat	/i:t/	57	/it/
/ɪ/	it	/it/	100	/it/
/e/	head	/hed/	50	/hed/
/æ/	man	/mæn/	100	/mæn/
/ɑ:/	car	/ka:/	92	/ka:/
/ɒ/	pot	/pɒt/	100	/pɒt/
/ɔ:/	all	/ɔ:l/	100	/ɔ:l/
/ʊ/	should	/ʃʊd/	40	/ʃu:d/
/u:/	two	/tu:/	90	/tʊ/
/ʌ/	blood	/blʌd/	30	/blɒd/
/ɜ:/	learn	/lɜ:n/	40	/len/
/ə/	rector	/rektə/	10	/rektɒ/
Substitution of Diphthongs				
/eɪ/	great	/greit/	10	/gret/
/aɪ/	fire	/faɪə/	10	/fara/
/ɔɪ/	oil	/ɔɪl/	20	/ɔl/
/əʊ/	sorrow	/sɒrəʊ/	5	/soɾo/
/aʊ/	house	/haʊs/	100	/haus/
/ɪə/	here	/hiə/	60	/hia/
/eə/	care	/keə/	70	/kia/
/ʊə/		/ʃʊə/		/ʃɔ/



	sure		65	
Substitution of Triphthongs				
/eɪə/	prayer	/preɪə/	25	/preja/
/aɪə/	fire	/faɪə/	32	/faja/
/ɔɪə/	royal	/rɔɪəl/	17	/rojal/
/əʊə/	lower	/ləʊə/	5	/lowa/
/aʊə/	hour	/aʊə/	10	/awa/

Discussion of Findings

The majority of the subjects used the short form /ɪ/ in place of the long /i:/ sound, as a result 100% subjects realized the short vowel /ɪ/ correctly. A total 50% and 100% of the subjects realized the vowel /e/ and /æ/ correctly while, /a:/ was pronounced by 92% of the subjects. The reason for this is that the vowel /a:/ is an open and a long vowel so, there is the tendency that Obolo speakers of English are liable to produce it. On the other hand, Obolo has /a/ as an allophone of /a:/. Also, 40% of the subjects correctly used the vowel /ʊ/. The following vowel sounds are not in the Obolo vowel inventory, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/ hence, the substitution of the available Obolo sounds for the English sounds, aiding the prompts replacement of the English central vowels.

The subjects find it difficult to realize the English diphthong as the native speaker did, rather they delete or substitute the available vowel in their repertoire in cause of realizing the diphthong. For instance, the diphthong /eɪ/ was realized by 20% of the subjects, while 80% delete the

second segment of the diphthong /ɪ/ in course of pronouncing the word “great”. The word “fire” was pronounced correctly by 60% of the subjects, while 40% represents number not able. It was also discovered that the subjects substitute /a/ for /ə/ as Obolo vowel chart has no schwa sound /ə/. It was difficult for the subjects to glide in the direction of the second vowel hence, deleting the sound /ɪ/ while in reality /eɪ/ was the target phoneme. Diphthong like /əʊ/ and /ʊə/, were monothongized, as in /o/ in “sorrow”, /ɔ/ in “sure” respectively. Mostly, the second sound of a diphthong is normally deleted during pronunciation. For instance, it is evidence that the sound /i/ and /ʊ/ were dropped in the pronunciation of the words “great” and “sorrow”. The following vowel sounds were monothongized /eɪ/ - /e/ and /əʊ/ - /o/. The Obolo sound system has no diphthongs making Obolo speakers of English to monothongized diphthongs while using English words.

It was also discovered that the subjects replaced some English



sound segments with the available vowel sounds in their Obolo (mother tongue). The triphthongs /eɪə/, /aɪə/, /ɔɪə/, /əʊə/ and /aʊə/, were realized as /eya/ as in “prayer”, /aya/ in “fire”, /ojal/ in “royal” /owa/ in “lower”, and /awa/ in place of /aʊə/ respectively. The triphthong /əʊə/ was responsible for the highest number of not able.

Conclusion

Substitution and deletion of sound segment is no longer a new phenomenon amongst second language (L2) users in Nigeria. It is a process that entails command of the first language (L1) and its influence on the L2, as this study presents the influence of Obolo vowel sounds on the spoken variety of English in Nigeria. The analysis revealed that the central vowels are not in Obolo sound system making it difficult for the subjects to pronounce words that have any of the central vowels hence, prompting the possibility of substitution. Again, Obolo has no diphthong in its sound system; this created an avenue for the deletion of phonemes and monothongization of diphthongs while using English word. The substitution of Obolo phonemes for English phonemes is an attempt to simplify English sounds which appear difficult to Obolo speakers of English. Both languages do not share the same phonological system, as some English vowels not found in Obolo vowel system pose problems to the users, as a result Obolo sound is substituted for English. There are several languages spoken in Nigeria, this study suggests that research of this nature should be taking in other

minority languages to ascertain further evidence of L1 influence on the version of English spoken in Nigerian.

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