

To the Problem of Nigerian English Idioms Peculiarities¹

Tatiana G. Voloshina², Igor V. Chekulai³, Irina M. Chebotareva³, Natalia V. Fisunova³, Daria M. Kostina³

Abstract

The relevance of this article is determined by the debatable nature of definitions of idioms concept in the sphere of language variability. The English language of Nigeria is a linguistic unit, combining the properties and features of the English language at the phonetic, grammatical, morphological levels and processing the elements of own cultural identification. Due to the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria, the lexical layer of the language contains many linguistic definitions from the indigenous languages of Nigeria, which determines the difficulty of identifying the meaning of idioms without analyzing the lexical composition of the original linguistic units. The aim of the article is to formulate the definition of the idiom in the framework of contact linguistics; to identify the characteristic features of Nigerian English idioms; to study the specifics of the Nigerian idioms of the English language on the material of linguistic dictionaries. Language is not a stable formation, but it is the subject to a constant dynamic process of changes at the morphological, syntactic, phonological levels. Depending on the local affiliation, certain languages also have a certain number of dialects, which provokes linguists' interest at the present stage of scientific development. It is possible to trace language features of English variations on the example of Malaysian English in which lexical structure of language comes from Malay, Chinese and Borneo languages. An important aspect of the analysis of linguistic features of a language is the study of phraseological units. This part of vocabulary presents the main originality of the language specificity and reflects the true linguistic and cultural features associated with belonging to a certain interethnic identity. Idioms in English that develop in different sociolinguistic contexts can be defined as belonging to a particular variety of English variant. A variety of modifications of English idioms can represent an idiom not only at the structural and lexical levels, but also include a semantic shift that can only be identified by a careful analysis of the language used in its social context.

¹ Please cite this paper as follows:

Voloshina, T. G., Chekulai, I. V., Chebotareva, I. M., Fisunova, N. V., & Kostina, D. M. (2019). To the problem of Nigerian English idioms peculiarities. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(SP), 1203-1209.

² Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia; tatianavoloshina@rambler.ru

³ Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia.

Keywords: Language Variation; Nigerian English; Cultural Identity; Indigenization.

1. Introduction

Foreign researchers have studied the peculiarities of linguistic and cultural idioms in combination with a particular variety of the language. For linguists working on the problems of dialects and language variability, a difficult question was the need to identify a clear criterion for determining idioms that have undergone a language shift (structural, lexical or semantic) and are now associated with specific dialects (Adegbija, 2004; Adeniyi, 2006).

In our research work, the idioms, representing the language variant of English, namely the English language of Nigeria, are analyzed. The purpose of this study is to identify the historical, linguistic and cultural features of the idioms functioning in the English language of Nigeria. The purpose of the study identified a range of objectives: to determine the specificity of the idioms of English Nigeria, to identify Nigerian English idioms characteristics, to explore the variety of Nigerian English idioms. The dictionaries of H. Igboanusi for the periods from 2001 to 2017 served as the practical material of the work.

2. Methods

This article is based on the systemic approach to the interdisciplinary analysis. Due the cognitive cross-disciplinary approach we take into consideration the anthropocentric factor, linguistic and non-linguistic information, intercultural analyses, especially dealing with the problem of mentality and language correlation.

3. Results and Discussions

English has an official status in Nigeria. The territorial English version of Nigeria went through a complex process of acculturation during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Many former British colonies, such as Nigeria, retained English as a means of national communication, as well as a means of international communication, even after gaining the country's independence (Akere, 1992; Baghana et al., 2018). This process has led to the emergence of national varieties such as Nigerian English, which reflects Nigerian's own experience typically characterized in aspiration and multilingual nature. In the works of the famous researcher Katchru (2006) the classification of users of the English language around the world was developed. According to this typology, it is customary to distinguish three circles of influence of the English language: the inner circle, consisting of native speakers; the

outer circle, consisting of users of the English language as the second language; an expanding circle of native speakers of English as a foreign language, which is an implicit unit (Bamiro, 1991).

The term "Nigerian English" is defined as "a variant of English spoken by Nigerians" (Fernando & Flavell, 1981). This option is characterized to borrowing procedure and nativization features of the language, especially from indigenous languages. Numerous structures that would be completely incomprehensible to English speakers are officially used at the highest level of government in Nigeria (Grant & Bauer, 2004). Nigerian researcher Akere (1992) describes in his research the so-called process of "domestication of languages", by which the author understands "the transformation of the English language as an alien part, in order to make the addressee respond to speech patterns, sound patterns and the general cultural environment of the region" (Katchru, 2006). This process helps Nigerians to express their worldview on the international level. Thus, the territorial version of the English language of Nigeria is a linguistic version of the English language that preserves the norm of the English language and reflects the traits and characteristics of Nigerian culture and worldview.

Speaking about the variability of Nigerian English, it should be noted that there are two analogues: Nigerian English and Pidgin of Nigerian English or Nigerian Pidgin English). Many Nigerian linguists emphasize the fact that Nigerian English differs from Nigerian Pidgin in that its scope is characterized by connectionism among highly educated people. Nigerian English is used in formal contexts, unlike Nigerian Pidgin, which is considered to be the language of uneducated Nigerians, a broken model of communication as a lingua Franca among native speakers. Although Nigerian English differs in many aspects from Nigerian Pidgin, these two languages are closely related and have some influence on each other. A number of terms and expressions in Nigerian English derive from Nigerian Pidgin, for example: *siddon* meaning *to sit down*; *bush-meat* – *small game meat*, *akara* - *fried bean pies*, *offhead* – *memories* (Grant & Bauer, 2004).

In our study, only such variant as Nigerian English is analyzed, namely the peculiarities of idioms functioning of Nigerian English.

The linguistic situation of modern Nigeria, due to its multi-ethnic nature, has made an imprint on the formation and development of such a part of vocabulary as idioms. The use of certain idioms reflects the complex linguistic and cultural situation of Nigerian English, as the meaning of certain idioms are influenced by numerous indigenous languages. The complexity of the analysis of idiomatic expressions is also determined by the lack of a one clear criterion for determining the affiliation of expressions to idioms. In modern Nigerian linguistics, there is a certain set of features that, when interacting with other components, allow us to determine belonging to the "non-positional" and "compositional" groups of words (Laufer, 2004). The Nigerian researcher Langlotz (2006) argues about the structural factor. The author speaks

about idiomatic level, that is, 'the degree of belonging to the class of idiomatic constructions provided that the sum of all measurements— the full spectrum of all descriptive searchlights - gives a complete picture of the specific idiomatic nature of the construction.

Other researchers, such as Fernando and Flabell (1981) attempt to determine the nature of idioms (Langlotz, 2006). The authors of the study define an idiom as a unit that has a homonymous literal analogue, or at least whose individual components can be literally understood, and the meaning of which is not the result of the compositional function of its components, for example:

- (1) *red herring – misleading,*
- (2) *buy the farm - to die,*
- (3) *take the bull by the horns - to confront the difficulties and not avoid them,*
- (4) *fall flat - to be inconspicuous, to make no impression* (Igboanusi, 2002).

Another notable work defining the status of idioms in Nigerian English is the position of Grant and Bauer (Igboanusi, 2010; Laufer, 2004). Within this direction, an idiom can be defined as a verbose unit which meaning cannot be derived from the individual meanings of its constituent parts and which has both literal and figurative meaning. Idioms in this perspective are also fixed and institutionalized units. Identifying the meaning of an idiom in different language variation of interpretation is a major problem that can only be solved through a systematic procedure of studying the linguistic characteristics of indigenous languages (Liu, 2002).

Examples:

- (5) *Kola - bribery, bribery,*
- (6) *Tokunbo - used vehicles,*
- (7) *Buharigate - quarrel, scandal,*
- (8) *Toronto – fake,*
- (9) *Maradona - sly and wily man* (Igboanusi, 2010).

In a number of other cases, mentioned by Adegbia, there is no sign of idiomatic characteristic feature in some idioms. The proposed examples provide words which meanings are literal rather than figurative, for example:

- (10) *to pay the bride price - pay the dowry,*
- (11) *minimum wage - the smallest amount to be paid as wages* (Igboanusi, 2002).

Other expressions have a controversial status, as it is not possible to determine whether these idioms are actually Nigerian English idioms, due to the fact

that the author has not provided evidence of attribution of such status to them, for example:

(12) *to be on seat- to be in office – this expression of consumed on territory of the Eastern parts of Africa* (Igboanusi, 2002),

(13) *black market - illegal transaction – the expression in question has been recorded in dictionaries of the Indian version of English and in several variations of Nigerian English* (Igboanusi, 2010),

(14) *to be heavy - to be pregnant* (Igboanusi, 2010)

The analysis of the examples showed that some of the expressions may belong to the list of English idioms, while they are not necessarily unique to Nigerian English.

In the works of the Nigerian researcher Adeyanju, a systematic linguistic analysis was carried out in which the criteria of belonging of idioms to the native Nigerian origin were revealed (Langlotz, 2006; Liu, 2002). One way that can help to distinguish whether an idiom is unique to Nigerian English, according to the author, is to find evidence that the etymology of the definition in question can be traced to any indigenous Nigerian language. The author stresses the importance of languages' contact and the possibility of a cooperative process of free borrowing elements or whole phrases structures from one language of interethnic communication to another (Moon, 1998; Voloshina et al., 2019). Some idioms have different etymologies grounds, while with other expressions the etymology has blurred boundaries or does not even exist. Any idiom is a definition that has been borrowed or transferred from any Nigerian language. This type of borrowing and method of translation makes Nigerian English different from other varieties of English.

Examples:

(15) *beat one's chest - Express pride or be proud - borrowing from the Hausa language 'bugun gaba',*

(16) *bad belle - malice, vindictiveness - borrowing from Nigerian Pidgin English* (Igboanusi, 2002).

A distinctive feature of Nigerian English is the appearance in it of certain number of neologisms. Neologisms are understood to mean "a new form or expression created either entirely anew or by distortion". The lexical composition of modern Nigerian English is distinguished by the ability to "absorb lexical units, phraseological expressions from other languages". Neologism refers to linguistic processes that are caused by the demands of time. A distinctive feature of Nigerian English is the presence of rapid adaptation of modern vocabulary. Examples containing idioms with neologisms are:

(17) *fraud - from the anti-fraud section of the Constitution,*

(18) *short put feces - wrapped in plastic and thrown into the street,*

(19) *area boys - local criminals* (Igboanusi, 2010).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the process of identifying idioms on the basis of a linguistic material is a very complex process in which the researcher must carefully analyze and consider the question of the exact affiliation of such an idiom to a particular language variant. Criteria of idioms selection to this or that language variant can be limited by impossibility of its flexibility in the written form, the absence of information on other varieties of the language variants which are in immediate local proximity. In this regard, any effort to compile corpus of language varieties, such as the international corpus of English project, which compiles Englishmen around the world, would facilitate the comparison of language variants and improve the efficiency of this kind of work. English in Nigeria has certain characteristics at all levels: phonetic, lexical, grammatical. The lexical composition of Nigerian English is a unit combining the linguistic and cultural features of both English and the vocabulary of interethnic languages, intercultural communication of the indigenous languages of Nigeria. Most Nigerian linguists view idioms as a complex indivisible entity, the meaning of whose components cannot be distinguished from the individual meanings of its constituent parts. It is very difficult to determine the structure, characteristics, typologies of idioms of Nigerian English due to the limited number of recorded sources and the multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria. A distinctive feature of the idioms of Nigerian English is the tendency of modern language to use neologisms.

References

- Adegbija, E. (2004). *The domestication of English in Nigeria*. Festschrift in Honour of Abiodun Adetugbo. Lagos: University of Lagos Press.
- Adeniyi, K. (2006). *Attitudes to Nigerian English among Lagos state teachers: A sociolinguistic survey*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin.
- Akere, F. (1992). *Sociocultural constraints and the emergence of a standard Nigerian English*. London: Longman.
- Baghana, J., Voloshina, T. G., Kotch, K. I., Rodina, L. I., & Radovich, M. A. (2018). Theoretical issues of language contacts, borrowings and interference. *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, 12, 1074-1079.
- Bamiro, E. O. (1991). Nigerian Englishes in Nigerian English literature. *World Englishes*, 10(1), 7-17.
- Fernando, C., & Flavell, R. H. (1981). *On idiom: Critical view and perspectives* (Vol. 5). University of Exeter Press.

- Grant, L., & Bauer, L. (2004). Criteria for re-defining idioms: Are we barking up the wrong tree? *Applied linguistics*, 25(1), 38-61.
- Igboanusi, H. (2002). *A dictionary of Nigerian English usage*. Enicrownfit Pub.
- Igboanusi, H. (2010). *A dictionary of Nigerian English usage*. Berlin: Global Book Marketing.
- Katchru, B. (2006). *The handbook of world Englishes*. Nelson: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Langlotz, A. (2006). *Idiomatic creativity: A cognitive-linguistic model of idiom-representation and idiom-variation in English* (Vol. 17). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Laufer, B. (2004). *Avoidance of idioms in a second language: The effect of L1-L2 degree of similarity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Liu, D. (2002). *The most frequently used spoken American English idioms: A corpus analysis and its implications*. Cambridge: TESOL Quarterly.
- Moon, R. (1998). *fixed expressions and text: A study of the distribution and textual behavior of fixed expressions in English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Voloshina, T. G., Koch, K. I., Rodina, L. I., Ostapova, L. Y., & Bocharova, E. A. (2019). Interference peculiarities in the period of Globalisation. *Dilemas Contemporáneos: Educación, Política y Valore*, 6(Special).