Nigerian English: In Conversation with Professor Amechi N. Akwanya

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Abstract
Although Professor Amechi N. Akwanya is well known for his work in African literary criticism, he has also made significant inroads into the study of the English language in Nigeria. However, not many people are familiar with his work in this regard. The aim of this conversation, therefore, is to highlight this not-well-known aspect of his writing. Using his 1998 publication in *Review of Education* titled "Towards the evolving of a Nigerian standard of English" as a jumping-off point, I engage him in conversation to relay his thoughts on the English language in Nigeria. Given the deepening and widening of the functional load of English in Nigeria, the Nigerian variety of English has been a topic of critical discussion for many intellectuals in the field of English studies not just locally but also globally. It is therefore considered important to examine the viewpoints of prominent scholars in the field regarding the development of Nigerian English. The conversation also offers an opportunity to see how, if at all, Akwanya's take on Standard Nigerian English—or to use his term "a Nigerian standard of English"—has evolved over the years. Given the rapidly growing scholarship on Nigerian English and in light of recent events (e.g., the availability of corpora, dictionaries and teaching materials – see Ugwuanyi, 2022), I engage Prof. Akwanya in conversation regarding his stance on the current status of this variety of English. This intellectual discourse (which departs significantly from a typical interview) is presented in *topics*, where both interactants take on themes at issue rather than taking the traditional 'question and answer' pattern. Nevertheless, the greater chunk of the interaction focuses on Prof. Akwanya's viewpoints. In this discussion, Akwanya talks about the scope of his intellectual engagements with (the study of) the English language in Nigeria, English language teaching, and the interesting relationship between language and thought and literature. We also x-rayed a wide range of other themes touching on the evolution of Nigerian English, and the challenges facing its full institutionalisation in the country, namely conceptualisation, intelligibility and acceptability (both locally and internationally), closing with his prognostications about Nigerian English.

Topic 1

KOU: Since it seems that many people are not familiar with your work on the English language in Nigeria, I think it would be right to start this conversation by telling our readers the extent of your work in this regard. Can you summarise your work in this area, highlighting your areas of focus?

ANA: I noticed early in my teaching career that there is deep ambivalence towards the English language in the general community. People glibly said: 'English is not our language'; they also freely complained about the falling standards of English usage. English was said not to be 'our language'; yet university admission required proficiency in it, and all courses taught at the tertiary level, in fact, from senior secondary level were in English, to say nothing of public

discourse – mass media, and so forth, which were, and continue to be conducted in English. So, this ambivalence kept me thinking: there would be no getting English language usage right without overcoming this ambivalence. I also observed an attitude of utilitarianism in a variety of social environments. Gradually, it became clear to me that this attitude prevailed in language usage as well. The Igbo are well noted for mixing English and Igbo in their speech, even people with no formal education. There is a work song by young men drafted to work on a road being constructed by the colonial authorities in *Arrow of God.* It said:

Lebula toro toro
A day!
Lebula toro toro
A day!

'A day' is obvious enough. 'Lebula' is *labourer;* and 'toro', I think, is 'three (pence)'! Borrowing and domestication of English is already here advanced, with *toro toro* reflecting the Igbo distributive plural, which I think did not make it into Central Igbo grammar.

My inference from these observed linguistic practices was that what governed the easy mixing of codes by the Igbo was simply *what worked.* Within education and other formal linguistic environments, what seemed to matter was transfer of meaning: as long as meaning could be made out, the student scored marks. It was called *content* in the marking guides. Those who had the patience to learn how the specific kinds of meanings are packaged or to nuance their packaging were relatively few. The mass media, print in particular, may be unaware of its power to influence language along with people's thinking and attitudes, often took not enough care to check that the word deployed in a specific slot was the exact and right one.

Noticing all this led to my querying of the ready-to-hand notion of language as a means of communication, because I thought that its easy acceptance and widespread use was by reason of the philosophy of utilitarianism – a philosophy which was not learned from John Stuart Mill, but native. My book *Language and Habits of Thought* published in 2005 was chiefly inspired by these questions: the nature of language, its behaviour patterns in various environments, the amount of liberty we could exercise with it and the limits it imposes, and so forth. Different aspects of these questions occur in my other language studies. My Professorial Inaugural, entitled *English Language Learning in Nigeria: In Search of an Enabling Principle* (2007), was basically concerned with the aspect of learning the language in a thoroughgoing way, and emphasised *devoted* reading of literature – the kind that seriously engages thought – for this purpose.

Topic 2

KOU: Talking about your professorial inaugural lecture work, the ideas espoused in the work greatly influenced my MA work on the role of literature in the development of language learners' communicative competence. Not only that, (the title of) my 2015 co-authored article draws heavily on it: "Interrogating the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria: Still in search of an enabling principle" (Ugwuanyi & Chukwu, 2016). But that's by the way.

You just talked about "the amount of liberty we could exercise with it [English] and the limits it imposes." This point seems to conflict with Widdowson's (1994, p. 384) famous claim that "You are proficient in a language to the extent that you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form." How do you reconcile these viewpoints since having a Nigerian variety of English entails breaking these imposed limits from the traditional centres of English?

ANA: I am delighted to know that you were able to draw from my research work and Inaugural. Great. On the statement by Widdowson about making a language one's own to the point of being able to bend it to one's purposes, I do not think that we are in sharp disagreement, actually. In the matter of names of things, a book, for example, there is a core meaning which relates the word to a certain object. This much is fixed in the language. But that does not exclude a saying like "throw the book at someone", where a physical book may not be in question, nor throw to be taken literally. The point is simply that rules exist; and they do bind. But they bind in such a way as to allow creativity. To throw the book at someone is well established in the usage of the language. It is probably possible to find out when it first entered into the language. But it did not close the door to creativity.

In *Things Fall Apart*, we read that 'the white man has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart', something like that. The statement is not literally true, but it is knowledge of the things that people usually do with knives that enables the interpretation. There is certainly exercise of freedom with language there, but the knife is still in some way doing what knives usually do. All the same, words can be wrongly used; that is to say, they can resist a use we wish to put them to by standing out in the context. I doubt that 'the white man has put a book on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart' would work. Book stands out there. But it may bear thinking if the white man put a book on what held us together, and we are now inseparable.

In like manner, we cannot do anything at all we want with syntax. A sentence in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* goes this way: 'I had no other work more than to drink palm wine in my life'. We may well say that the narrator here succeeds in bending the language to his will. Still, outside the text, it would probably be considered awkward. Using such phrasing in a conversation is likely to call attention to the phrasing itself, instead of working like a transparent medium of meaning exchange. Indeed I would think that language proficiency includes the capacity to sense how far not to push a word beyond its currently established range, and the capacity to sense an oddity or awkwardness in usage.

Topic 3

KOU: Thank you, Prof., for brilliantly striking a balance between language rules and creativity in language. My next topic is somewhat related to (or stems from) the previous one. In your first response, you mentioned that Nigerians complain about "falling standards of English usage" in the country. In world Englishes studies, this phenomenon known as the "complaint tradition" is said to be characteristic of most new varieties of English, including US English

which some British speakers to date see as a "corrupt form" (Milroy & Milroy, 1998; Schneider, 2007; Jowitt, 2019). In other words, some of the forms of usage about which people complain (and therefore see as errors) are indeed seen by others as the features of an emerging variety. Are these two sides of the same coin or different ends of the spectrum?

ANA: Yes, there is a point in the 'complaints tradition'. An interesting phrase. There are complaints about everything in Nigeria: the political culture, the moral environment, the ethnic composition, the very history of amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, the economy, education, and so forth. Some issues are thought of as wrongs that need to be righted; others, like law and order, the economy, and education are thought of as having a golden age in the past, with a systematic pattern of decline ever after. With respect to language, part of the problem is language change itself, which is happening all the time, evolving new usages; and as the younger generation are often more freely interacting in the platforms where change is rapid, the older generation are left behind, uncomprehending.

Also, in discussing the standards of English language usage in Nigeria, we should really distinguish between speaking and writing. With increasing numbers of young families bringing up their children to speak – sometimes only – English, watching English language television programmes, and getting an early start with ICT generally, it is probably more correct to say that the spoken language is rather improving than declining. English as a language of choice for bringing up children may be used as a rough measure of the strength of the middle class: their number and influence are on the rise, and they are dominantly urban and sub-urban. There are issues of course with the standard of pronunciation, which may reflect shortcomings and peculiarities in the learning environment. But it does become manifest in writing that many of the 'good' speakers have serious problems with spelling, concord and government, notation of sentence and clause boundaries, and variation in construction patterns.

It is possible – this should be properly investigated – that those who learned English in school, as opposed to those who grew up with it have a keener sense of the rules of grammar. The observed falling standards may in fact relate to the decreasing numbers of learners whose exposure to English is mainly in the school compared to those who grew up with it and have not received sufficient tutoring on the mechanics of the language. A similar problem may be observed when people with insufficient exposure in the mechanics of their own ethnic language attempt to write or transcribe it, although they speak it fluently.

Topic 4

KOU: It is interesting that you see the new forms of English usage among Nigerians in a positive light and as a necessary process of language change. Your response also reflects the time-honoured understanding that young speakers are the leading drivers of language change (Bybee, 2015). Very importantly, your call to properly investigate the English language repertoires of Nigerians who acquired English in the formal context of school as against those who acquired it primarily in the informal context of the home interests me greatly – thank you for casting light on it for researchers of English in Nigeria to consider.

Now let's talk about your 1998 paper on Nigerian English which inspired this conversation. Beginning with the title of the paper ("Towards the evolving of a Nigerian standard of English"), two words pique my curiosity: "towards" and "evolving". In my view, these words suggest that you think Nigerian English was at its nascent stage of development despite the enormous scholarly attention it had already received at the time your article was published in 1998. It is now more than two decades since that paper was published. If you were to write the paper now, would you still echo this idea of something only starting to develop? In other words, what has changed since then in terms of the maturation of Nigerian English? Has it now evolved?

ANA: 1998 seems such a long time ago. However, I have read research papers in recent times discussing the difficulties that many Nigerian users of English, English language teachers and learners still have with certain vowel sounds, especially schwa, and consonant sounds, especially the voiced and unvoiced *th*, compared to what they call realizations by native speakers. I mention this because I understand a standard in terms of the standard of correctness and acceptability. Things I have read in the past about the Nigerian standard have tended to focus on lexical items, which are neither clearly of Nigerian origin nor derived from Nigerian vernaculars. Mind you, I expect that words from Nigerian vernaculars should be making it into English, like names of foods, vegetables, games, and so forth – some should be on the way to doing so by appearing in literary works being read worldwide and scientific research being published online.

My suspicion, however, is that the English establishment would welcome those as it has done hundreds of others from Latin America and elsewhere in Europe, as enrichment of the English language. What I think of as Nigerian English would be in terms of speech production which the phonologists are not pouring over with a red marker at the ready. It would be in terms of certain grammatical usages, including spelling, which may be wholly explained by processes that are of Nigerian origin. In my view, aspects of writing which the grammarians and those considered to be reliable as role models in English language usage continue to reject or mark wrong do not meet the standards prevailing in Nigeria. Maybe I belong to some old school, but there are key reference works that a standard should require so that it does not become a matter of individual tastes and preferences, which would be no standard at all.

One of those reference books I would expect to be a dictionary with authoritative pronunciation, spelling, and denotation guides. An authoritative grammar book which would provide the history, sources, and logical processes involved in specific usages would equally be desirable. Of course, I am in favour of a Nigerian standard, but if the required reference books are not yet available, I presume that their time will come, and then we will be able to say confidently that there is a Nigerian English Standard. Such reference material will require long and painstaking work, with appropriately trained, dedicated, and amply funded research teams, and relevant facilities. Our university system has tended to emphasise short-term and narrowly focused

research published as journal articles and readily usable for the purpose of assessments and promotions.

I do not see that there is any foundation or institution in Nigeria that could support the kind of project I think is needed, or even if there is a public interest in such an undertaking. There exists a National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN). Presumably this is supported by public interest. English is the official language of the Nigerian state, whether stated or not, but do you think that there would be public interest in Nigeria in support of an institution of the NINLAN sort for the English language? I doubt it. In these circumstances, what chances are there in the near future for the reference materials I think should go with a language standard to become available? You will agree with me, I think, that the sense of evolution implied in the title of the paper you reference is not being over-cautious.

Topic 5

KOU: Your point about the availability of reference materials which are necessary for the full standardization or codification of Nigerian English is, (co)incidentally, the focus of my just published article (Ugwuanyi, 2022), where I also stated that "the range of these codificatory instruments remain quite limited" ('codificatory instruments' is my term for what you call reference materials). Nevertheless, I also argued in the paper that Nigerian English is significantly being codified given the existing framework for standardization. For instance, you'd recall that in 2020, the OED include some Nigerian English words (OED, 2020), which addresses your expectation that "words from Nigerian vernaculars should be making it into English." Talking about this elsewhere (Ugwuanyi, 2020), I said that Nigerian English words are already making it into English.

You also talked about the existence of dictionaries of Nigerian English – as you might be aware there are currently about 4 in existence (2 published locally and 2 internationally). While these are significant foundational efforts (though mostly uncoordinated and small-scale), I completely agree with you that the absence of institutions (in the mould of the British Council, for example) that can support nationwide, coordinated, large-scale, and well-funded projects that can make the reference materials (of the nature you talked about) materialize is a major drawback. Given these limitations, what do you think Nigerian English researchers could do (even if at the individual level) to standardize and promote Nigerian English?

ANA: I do applaud the codificatory efforts you speak about and are involved in. They are steps in the right direction. You know, language scholars especially in the Anglo-American tradition often speak of speech as language in the proper sense, whereas those who have learned from the Port-Royal philosophers tend to give one coherent account for language, not one for speech; another for writing, since the understanding is that both speech and writing are independently modes of production of language. As I understand it, the codification you speak of is engaged with the writing part. Are there distinctive speech sounds that belong to the Nigerian standard? I think I can make out an Igbo educated speaker of English. I think I can make out speakers

whose first language is Hausa, Yoruba, or Efik. Would spoken Nigerian English Standard be a rough average of these?

How would this average be worked out? Or would it be any speech event reflecting any of these vernacular bases? So this is something that should also be looked at in considering the question of a Nigerian Standard. On your specific question about individual research efforts in the area of Nigerian English, I think that research is always good, whether you find evidence to confirm a hypothesis or to disconfirm one. Both outcomes are relevant in the codificatory process. In a dictionary that would be really informative, for instance, it would be of help to know if a word being considered for inclusion in the repertory is an anglicised native word, a nativised English word, a borrowing from some creole, Pidgin, loan-translation from a vernacular, or some other; that is, the case is made in the research, and this is information that the codifier would ultimately draw from. In Nigerian scholarship, division of labour is sometimes blurred; and the researcher in language history is also the codifier, just as novelists and poets sometimes try to assign the rules of critical judgment – something like being a judge in one's own case.

Topic 6

KOU: You are raising a very critical point here. And from your points, I now see that when world Englishes scholars talk about codification, they tend to place more emphasis on the written medium – which reflects what you said about the Anglo-American tradition. However, I am aware that there are also studies that have examined Nigerian English accent – but your point about the difficulty of working out what is *Nigerian* speech is apposite to the ongoing debate that we should be talking about accents of Nigerian English (which is no different from what is obtainable in other contexts of English usage).

Talking about accent, one question that often arises in regard to accent is intelligibility. Some worry that the Nigerian English accent might not be intelligible to speakers of English from elsewhere; others seem more concerned with intelligibility among Nigerians. Where do you sit within the opposing ends of this spectrum?

ANA: I do not think that enough attention has been given to the language issue in the age of globalization. My thinking, in fact, is that attention should begin to be given to the idea of international English, and not only national Englishes. For example, there are broadcast journalists and correspondents from Africa, including Nigeria, working in international news organisations, like Deutsche Welle, France 24, BBC, and so forth, with live interviews of people sometimes with low-level mastery of English. And people listen to them. If their listeners had any problems with the accents they were being exposed to, they probably quickly got over those, assisted by their needs for 'balanced' news – or some other value they seek in those outlets. So I do not think that there is any real problem with the 'Nigerian' accent – if in the light of what we have been saying, there is any such thing. I think that the only challenge is to learn English well; to learn it without any meaningless reservations, such as the idea that 'English is not our language''. It is perfectly possible, if the example of Canada is anything to go by, to master two languages, and be absolutely proficient in both. If we stop restraining ourselves from learning English, I do not think that the vernacular would necessarily suffer.

Rather, it should spur the institutions of vernacular language teaching and usage to buckle up and develop.

Keep in mind that within a few years of exposure to Igbo by the missionaries they were able to produce Igbo translations of the religious books, including the Bible. The energy for work with the vernaculars was allowed to slow down or even peter out with the departure of the missionaries. I do not think that the reason for the lack of an acceptable translation of *Things Fall Apart*, or *Hamlet,* or *Ulysses*, or the Nigerian Constitution into Igbo is because of too much attention being given to English or that the need for these translations does not exist. The broadcast media, travel, film and cinema, international trade, software-generated readouts, and so forth are helping to bring people in contact with different accents, and influencing the way people speak. We should expect that with time, accent will no longer be an obstacle to exchanges of meaning.

Topic 7

KOU: It has been an engaging conversation so far. As we begin to wind down, I would want to know what your prognostications about Nigerian English are. Do you think this variety of English will mature to the extent of its being globally recognised just like American English or Australian English? What factors or conditions do you think are necessary for this maturation to take place?

ANA: Yes, a Nigerian English should evolve over time, and take its place among the world's Standards. There are negative pressures against it though. A main source of pressure is identity politics. But mainstream Nigerian politics is also at work. I was in the secondary level in the second half of the 1960s when the way English was taught began to change. The workbook we used in Form One was called something like Rulker – I suppose that was the name of the author or editor. It taught the language using passages from literary texts. Soon after that, there was a separate subject called Literature and another one called English. The logic of this separation, I came to understand much later, was that literature was said to be European culture and had no role in Nigeria, while English was needed as a language for communication within Nigeria and with the outside world. Fortunately we did not fully transition into the new system until sometime in the 1970s.

My school was All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha, and the terminal examination was the London General Certificate of Education. That was the examination I took in January 1972. The English examination included literature, precis, essay, comprehension, and so forth. I think they were distributed in separate papers, but whether it was precis or comprehension, one was dealing with literary texts. The advantage of literature is that one is confronting the language where it is taking place. Later the seminary joined the other secondary schools in the West African School Certificate examination, where literature was an optional subject. My sense is that what is often bemoaned as the falling standards of English is directly linked to the official language policy in which English is called a means of communication, and learned for that purpose.

Some people may have a natural aptitude and a flair that support and facilitate rich mastery of the language and are thus able to escape the worst consequences of that policy.

For most of the learners, however, it renders language use as a translative process. They think in the vernacular dominantly, and when they speak English it is by translation. Identity politics also weighs in, with activists claiming that the vernacular is dying, and some propagate the theory that the use of English is why Nigeria has not developed, and cite the Asia tiger economies as examples where development finally became possible after they resumed using their languages for commerce, politics, and education at all levels. Evolution into a standard variety remains possible mainly because of the ethnic diversity of Nigeria and the lack of a single dominant vernacular. But it will be an evolution by default, I think, and having to struggle along without the passionate support of the people. It would help in a big way if the people in some way should take ownership of it.

Topic 8

KOU: One important indication of the growth of any language (variety) is its teaching in schools. What are your thoughts about adopting Nigerian English as the model of English language teaching in Nigerian schools?

ANA: I think that the use of this variety will be part of the evolution, when evolving local elements gain acceptance, and no longer feature in error analysis. For now such elements are subject to correction as part of instruction. The standard used in the error analysis is of course the British English Standard. In other words, English language teaching in Nigeria amounts to the imposition of the British English Standard; that is, a certain appropriation of that Standard.

Topic 9

KOU: So far it has been an intellectually stimulating discussion. Thank you for all the critical viewpoints, insights and propositions. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share regarding the development of English in Nigeria?

ANA: Attitudinal change is essential. It appears to me that overall, English is accepted in what the existentialists would call 'bad faith': we are living with it, despite not wanting it, living with it resentfully. A Nigerian Standard would not evolve in these circumstances; for a Standard would have to be owned; it would be 'Nigerian' in all senses. I see it this way: English is something that Nigeria has inherited as Nigeria. In fact, Nigeria came into existence with this language, and if you like, by means of this language. So I think that being a Nigerian is necessarily being with this language. In principle, Nigerian English already exists – if not in act or reality, at least in potency, as the Scholastics would say.

Therefore, self-doubt, self-criticism, reluctance and hesitancy, none of this should have any role in what we are doing in teaching and learning English, and in our relationship to the language generally. As the language of Nigeria, English is not in competition with Hausa or Igbo, or Yoruba, or Efik. The indigenous languages have their areas of dominance within

Nigeria, and should be able freely to develop and expand beyond these areas, provided that force is not involved. It is up to the users of these languages to help their language to develop. Athletes know that they have to practise incessantly and push themselves beyond the limits they have already attained. That is the only way to make progress. Language development is like that. This is why translation is so important for language development – translations of world-respected and influential books, translations of Nigerian literary works into the target vernacular, and translations of works and new publications from all over the world, in all languages: trying to get the language to do what it has never done before, and compelling it to discover new energies within itself.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discourse that Professor Akwanya is an exceptionally talented thinker and a rare scholar. The thoughts he shared above dig deep into the state of English language development in Nigeria. While he made wide-ranging, discipline-shaping points about (Nigerian) English or language more broadly, a few of them stand out for me: that despite the rules that impose limits on language usage, there is always room for creativity (and that the two are not necessarily at variance); that the utilitarian view of language as a means of communication that characterises English language learning in Nigeria limits the mastery of the language; that the divorce between English language and literature in Nigeria's educational system might be responsible for the falling standards of English in Nigeria today; that the glib idea that "English is not our language" while it remains the language of education and almost all official transactions is an ambivalence that must be resolved for a complete sense of ownership of Nigerian English to materialise; that accents will no longer be an obstacle to exchanges of meaning in the international linguistic market of English; and finally but most significantly that Nigerian English is rapidly evolving and that there are clear indications that it will continue to develop into full maturation when the right steps (e.g., the availability of reference material) are taken.

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