"English as a Native Second Language": The Problem of Taxonomy of Speakers in the Outer Circle

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Abstract

This paper examines an emerging sociolinguistic reality among Nigerian English speakers: a growing number of English monolinguals in Nigeria, especially among the younger generation. The expression "English as a native second language" forming part of the title of this paper may appear implausible, at least in terms of the taxonomy of the speakers of this variety of English, but it also demonstrates the complexity of the language situation in Nigeria, and indeed in other non-inner circles of English. With over 500 languages spoken in Nigeria, adopting English as a "language of compromise" seems inevitable since the indigenous languages are mutually unintelligible. As a result of increased integration among the different ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria and perhaps for some other considerations, English has become the primary language in many homes and social circles, resulting in the younger generation of Nigerians being English monolinguals. This study first examines models of World Englishes in light of the emerging sociolinguistic realities in Nigeria and evaluates the extent to which these models can be used to account for the new sociolinguistic realities. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, the questions of linguistic identity these emerging realities raise are put forward. The paper concludes by arguing for a more comprehensive description of English varieties and their speakers, considering the diverse situations, contexts, and attitudes that shape their linguistic landscape,

Keywords: Nigerian English, native speaker, linguistic identity, taxonomy, second language

1. Introduction

World Englishes (WE) research has significantly enhanced our understanding of how English, or language more broadly, spreads, functions, and takes up new identities in different environments. Insights from this ever-growing field of linguistics have continued to shape linguistic thought and theory in unique ways, helping linguists to challenge hitherto unquestioned concepts in the field. For instance, such linguistic terms as "native speakers" (NSs) and "mother tongue" (MT) are now being reconceptualised to accommodate new theorisations and findings emerging from the field of WE (Paikeday, 1985; Kandiah, 1998; Davies, 1991, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2000; Mufwene, 2012; Hansen Edwards, 2019). As these terms and concepts continue to be redefined, new sociolinguistic realities continue to emerge, thereby complicating their interpretations. As a result, there is an ever-increasing need to re-evaluate such terms in view of these emerging sociolinguistic realities.

The dynamic nature of the sociolinguistic milieu is unsurprising, given that it pertains to human behaviour (Coupland, 2016). In particular, the spread of English to virtually all parts of the world is increasingly topical as the language takes on new identities, fills ever-widening communicative needs and takes up new roles in different contexts (Crystal 2008). This spread implies that English is now used by new types of speakers in wide-ranging contexts, which necessitates new ways of understanding the linguistic identity of these speakers. Despite the extensive research and advocacy for the reconceptualisation (Ugwuanyi, 2021) and sometimes even outright jettisoning (Kachru, 2019) of the traditional understandings of fundamental terms such as "native speaker" and "mother tongue," it appears that the traditional ways of understanding these terms continue to hold sway, especially in the field of English language teaching (ELT).

Different models have been formulated to account for the spread of English around the world. One of the central concerns of many of these models is largely to conceptualise the relationship between English and its divergent speakers. That is, central to these models is the notion of the speaker identities claimed or assigned to speakers in different contexts, especially those who speak English in the non-traditional centres of English.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to assess the extent to which these models capture (or fail to capture) the emerging sociolinguistic realities in the outer-circle contexts of English usage, using Nigeria as a jumping-off point. In other words, how do the existing models of the spread of English account for the growing population of speakers in the non-inner-circle contexts whose only (or dominant) language is English? Can they be regarded as "native speakers" in any sense whatsoever? How do existing models of English characterise them? Since the emergence of speakers who use English as their L1 has been reported in other outer-circle contexts, such as in Singapore (Tan, 2014), in Hong Kong (Hansen Edwards, 2015), and among speakers of Indian and Malaysian Englishes (Higgins, 2003), it is considered necessary to examine the status of speakers who use Nigerian English as their L1 vis-à-vis the terms, concepts and taxonomies used in existing models to describe them. To provide insights into our case study, the following section gives a brief overview of the language situation in Nigeria.

2. Linguistic Topography of Nigeria

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, has a uniquely complex multilingual configuration. The country's population is currently estimated at about 218 million (World Bank, 2022), encompassing about 527 languages and 250 ethnic nationalities (Eberhard et al., 2023). In this sort of complex and diverse multilingual context, challenges related to language diversity are inevitable. One reason for this multicultural and multilingual design stems from the fact that Nigeria was forged into a single country from several areas that were culturally and linguistically different during the British colonial occupation of the country. Many of these languages are mutually unintelligible, which makes intra-national (and sometimes, intra-family) communication difficult in any one of the indigenous languages. Among these hundreds of languages, only three—Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba—are designated as major or national languages because they have larger speaker populations than the rest of the languages.

Hausa, spoken by approximately 57 million native speakers, is predominant in the north; Yoruba, with about 48 million speakers, is prevalent in the west, and Igbo, spoken by an estimated 41 million, is predominant in the east (Eberhard et al., 2023). This suggests that, collectively, speakers of these three languages represent more than half of the entire population (see Simpson and Oyetade, 2008). While these three national languages are recognised as co-official languages alongside English, it is English that has remained predominant in the official contexts because the speakers of the other minoritised languages tend to feel linguistically marginalised by (the speakers of) these majoritised languages.

Nigeria's earliest encounter with the English language can be traced back to the late 16th century as a result of transatlantic trade and the activities of Christian missionaries. However, the decisive moment for its formal and widespread incorporation occurred with the colonisation of Nigeria in the early 20th century (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999). Since that pivotal period, English has steadfastly maintained its position as the official language of the country, serving as the primary medium for official transactions, particularly at the national level. Even though the Nigerian Constitution explicitly allows for government affairs to be conducted in any of the national languages (i.e., Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba) when adequate arrangements are made, thereby granting these languages co-official status with English (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999), such provisions are seldom put into practice. In theory, there are five official languages (including French),[1] but in reality, English continues to dominate almost all official interactions. This linguistic dominance extends to government documents, including the Constitution itself, which are published and disseminated in English.

Furthermore, the current language-in-education policy, which provides for the instruction of children in any of the indigenous languages during their early years of primary education, encounters notable challenges in its practical application (Danladi, 2013). This policy-practice discrepancy means that most Nigerian schoolchildren are taught in English throughout their education life. What is more, the prevalence of English as the de facto lingua franca in wider Nigerian society has been on the rise. Children in both formal educational settings and domestic environments—particularly when parents lack a shared language—now find themselves exposed to English at an early stage. Consequently, a considerable number of young Nigerians are adopting English as their primary means of communication, and in some cases, it becomes the only language they can use (Udofot, 2003; Jowitt, 2019). These situations, no doubt, have led to a significant impact on the linguistic landscape of Nigeria, with English deeply permeating various layers of the country's societal fabric now than it has ever been.

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[1] French was declared as Nigeria's second official language by the late General Sani Abacha in 1996. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize the contentious nature of French being recognized as one of Nigeria's official languages (Omoniyi, 2003; Igboanusi & Putz, 2008). In 1996, during a diplomatic dispute between the military regime at the time and the Western power bloc, the then Head of State, Sani Abacha, declared French an official language in Nigeria. This decision seemed to be a deliberate move to challenge the English-speaking world (represented by the US and the UK) while also seeking to establish new economic relationships with the French-speaking world, particularly Nigeria's French-speaking neighbours; but this was not really implemented. However, some scholars argue that since subsequent government policies failed to overturn it, French should continue to be considered an official language in Nigeria, even if only theoretically.

This linguistic shift holds significant implications for the sociolinguistic identity of these English-speaking individuals in Nigeria. It prompts a nuanced exploration from the lens of World Englishes (WE). Understanding the various forms and functions of English within this diverse linguistic context becomes crucial to unravelling the intricate interplay between societal dynamics and the evolving linguistic identities of the younger generation in Nigeria. In essence, placing the sociolinguistic identity of these speakers of English in Nigeria within the models of WE is the overarching aim of this paper.

3. Models of World Englishes

It is no longer debatable that English is the world's lingua franca. Despite concerns about English "killing" or displacing other languages, otherwise known as "linguistic imperialism" (see Phillipson, 2012), the worldwide interest in learning English continues to grow. There appears to be some tension between using one's language as cultural identification and adopting English as the language of globalisation (Canagarajah, 2006). Modiano (2004, p. 225) captures this tension more succinctly: "[r]etaining our indigenous cultures and language(s) while reaping the benefits of large-scale integration via a language of wider communication is the challenge many of us will no doubt have to come to terms with in the years to come." The benefits of using English for wider communication appear to be very highly prioritised by many, sometimes even over the benefits of using one's language of cultural identification. However, it is obvious that different diverse relationships exist between English and its divergent users across the world. Various models have been devised to account for these relationships.

Traditionally, English is broadly classified into three distinct categories: English as a Native Language, English as a Second Language, and English as a Foreign Language (Strang, 1970; Quirk et al., 1972). These classifications provide insight into the diverse contexts in which English is spoken and employed worldwide. Firstly, English as a Native Language (ENL) denotes situations where a substantial population considers English their "native" or first language. In these settings, English serves as an integral part of individuals' linguistic identity and daily communication, reflecting its deep-rooted presence within a particular community. Secondly, English as a Second Language (ESL) pertains to regions or communities where English, although not the primary language, assumes an official role and functions as the second language for a considerable number of people. In ESL contexts, English is often used in various official settings, playing a significant role in shaping the sociolinguistic landscape. Lastly, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) characterises scenarios in which English is primarily acquired and utilised for international communication. In EFL contexts, English is often learned for academic, business, or diplomatic purposes, serving as a bridge for cross-cultural interactions on a global scale. Despite the shortcomings of this conventional classification, it provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of English language use and the global significance of English in various linguistic contexts.

Although Kachru's (1985) model known as the "Concentric Circles of English" —Inner, Outer and Expanding—aligns roughly with the traditional ENL-ESL-EFL categorisation, it challenges a number of assumptions inherent in the traditional classification, significantly redefining the nature of the use and functional differences in the diverse contexts in which English is used (Kachru, 1984). Kachru's model, considered by many as the most influential model of WEs (e.g., Jenkins, 2007; Seargeant, 2012; Saraceni, 2015; Baratta, 2019), emphasises three distinct circles of English: the Inner Circle (IC), the Outer Circle (OC), and the Expanding Circle (EC). These circles consider factors like the types of spread, acquisition patterns, functional allocation, and sociolinguistic realities (Kachru, 1992a). The IC comprises countries where English is the "native" language, including the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Canada and South Africa. Notably, the IC is seen as "norm-providing," setting usage standards for the other circles.

The OC involves contexts where English is used by speakers with other first languages, primarily former British colonies in Asia and Africa. English is often acquired formally in the classroom and predominantly used in official domains. The OC is considered "norm-developing" in recognition of emerging local varieties with their norms. The EC pertains to countries where English is neither the majority's first language nor an official language. In EC contexts, English is mainly used for international communication due to globalisation. The model characterises the EC as "norm-dependent," indicating that it lacks localised forms capable of developing their own norms, which makes it tend to defer to the norms of the IC. On the whole, Kachru's model offers a comprehensive understanding of English's global dynamics, considering how it is acquired, spread, and functionally allocated across the Circles.

One momentous contribution of CC is its introduction of the notion of "World Englishes," implying variation rather than monolithism. It has, however, been widely criticised for privileging the Inner Circle as "norm providing" since it constitutes "the traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English" (Kachru, 1984, p. 25) (Higgins, 2003; Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004; Pennycook, 2017). Graddol (1999) and Jenkins (2007) have argued strongly that the idea of the Inner Circle as the norm providing is now questionable when speakers of English in the Outer/Expanding Circles far outnumber those in the Inner Circle. Moreover, the notion of speakers of English in the IC as the "native" speakers is another contentious issue.

McArthur's (1987) and Görlach's (1988) models follow Kachru's tripartite classification and are, arguably, expansions of the CC. However, instead of having the ENL at the centre, these models place "International English" (Görlach) and "World Standard English" (McArthur) at the centre/inner circle, followed by regional standard Englishes (British, African, US, etc), and then the outermost circle comprising sub-regional (non-standard) varieties. One other major criticism of all the models of the Kachruvian tradition is that they are based on historical, geographical or even colonial relationships between varieties rather than focused on the speakers of English and their identification or relationship with the language. In other words, such classification makes assumptions about the use of English that pertains to entire countries/regions instead of focusing on the linguistic repertoires of the users of English in these contexts.

To mitigate these drawbacks, more recent models have shifted their focus to speakers rather than the general language community. For instance, Yano (2001) suggests a departure from the concentric categorisation of speakers of English as in the earlier models, arguing that models of the spread of English should account for speakers within the OC who consider themselves native speakers of English. Building on Kachru's (1999) idea of "genetic" and "functional" speakers, Yano (2001) proposed a two-way classification of speakers of English: genetic and functional native speakers as belonging to one spectrum and then "nonnative" speakers another. One obvious advantage of this categorisation is that it places a premium on the speakers.

Similarly, Modiano (1999) proposes a model he called the "Centripetal Circles of International English." He claims that the centre comprises both native and nonnative speakers who are proficient in international English and do not have regional accents; the second circle consists of proficient speakers of regional Englishes, be they native or nonnative; and the outermost circle consists of learners of English. Despite certain drawbacks, notably the notion that the inner circle lacks accents, this model prioritises proficiency. Another significant contribution of Modiano's model is its introduction of the notion of English as a lingua franca, similar to the perspectives of McArthur (1987) and Görlach (1988). But just like these models, its conceptualisation of "International English" tends to be nebulous. There is also a level of arbitrariness in the placement of varieties within this model, potentially leading to the assumption of proximity relationships that may not actually exist and overlooking existing relationships (Jenkins, 2003).

To this list may be added Edgar Schneider's Postcolonial English (PCE) paradigm (Schneider, 2007), which approaches the spread of English from a diachronic perspective. The PCE paradigm examines English in different communities across its life cycle, starting from the community's foundation through some form of colonial presence to its evolution as a stable, distinct and independent variety. The cycle undergoes a five-stage evolution process: Foundation (English is introduced to a new territory through colonial expansion), Exonormative Stabilisation (English expands in its functions but the linguistic norms are determined by the mother country), Nativisation (as the colony experiences sociolinguistic and political turmoil, the ties between the colony and mother country weaken, giving rise to a new local variety), Endonormative Stabilisation (mostly after political independence, the local variety stabilises, is codified, and becomes the new norm) and Differentiation (this homogeneous variety diversifies with the emergence of new group- or region-specific varieties). The nativisation stage is particularly dynamic in this model, with Schneider noting that Nigerian English has unequivocally entered this stage (Schneider, 2007, p. 210). However, a notable challenge of the model lies in its inability to visually represent variation within varieties and proficiency levels of speakers due to its unidimensional nature.

Whilst it is obvious that most of the models appear to conceal more than they reveal, it now appears generally acknowledged in WE scholarship that any model that aims to capture modern realities of the spread of English and the fluidity of the lines that divide the different circles should prioritise the unique identities of speakers rather than their geographic or historical distribution. This is the premise of the argument that follows.

4. Towards a taxonomy of speakers of English in Nigeria

In today's Nigeria, it makes sense to classify speakers of English into at least two: those whose *only* language is (Nigerian) English and those who speak English alongside one or more Nigerian languages. However, the reality is more intricate than this classification suggests. One, that English is a person's first or only language does not mean that such people are more proficient speakers than those who are bi- or multilinguals of English and (an)other language(s). Two, it should not be taken for granted that Nigerians (including monolingual speakers, bi-/multilinguals, and other non-English-speaking Nigerians) are in social intercourse, which may further blur the boundaries. Again, whilst there are English-only speakers in the strictest sense, there are a few of them who minimally can switch between English and Nigerian Pidgin (Kperogi, 2015), another language that is widely spoken by many Nigerians.

Rampton's (1990) seminal work on "displacing the native speaker," which challenges the idea of NSs, has significantly influenced thinking in WE research. Building on this foundation, a number of other researchers (e.g., Jenkins, 2007; Canagarajah, 1999; Seidlhofer, 2001; Aneja, 2016; Kalugampitiya, 2014) have challenged the notion of regarding NSs as norm-providers. Rampton (1990), much like others mentioned here, argues that political and ideological considerations always *colour* those models that privilege NSs, suggesting that the notions of "expertise" (competence) and "loyalty" (identification) can be employed in categorising speakers of English. Rampton concludes that terms such as NSs and MT are value-laden and, therefore, clutter our perception of the actual situation. A curious question then arises: How do we categorise the various groups of speakers of English in the Outer Circle?

Some WE scholars, such as Higgins (2003) and Borlongan (2016), posit that speakers of English in the outer circle are also NSs of their respective English varieties, such as native speakers of Nigerian English. This approach gives all NSs their own *right* to *own* the language they speak (Pierce, 1997; Higgins, 2003; Ugwuanyi, 2021). It seems to offer a fair resolution, acknowledging the distinct linguistic identities of NSs. However, this position is not without its shortcomings. As Mufwene (2001) and Kachru (2019) point out, any taxonomy that allows MT and NSs is bound to still privilege a small number of speakers of English as legitimate speakers. In fact, Mufwene argues that even the broader terms of the Kachruvian model—inner, outer and expanding—are implicitly divisive and should be avoided. He, however, does not offer the field alternative terms. One drawback of this position is its oversight of the varying levels of competence among speakers of English. Continuing to use the terms MT or NSs implies that these speakers have higher proficiency than those who may have learned English as an additional language. This may not accurately reflect the diverse linguistic abilities within this group.

A similar view, which is proposed by Yano (2001), is that the term “native” can be retained, but that it has to further be qualified. This view distinguishes between two kinds of nativeness: genetic and functional, terms borrowed from Kachru (1992b). While Kachru uses the terms “genetic nativeness” and “functional nativeness” to describe the domains of use and the degree of social penetration of a language in a society, Yano (2001) appears to suggest that these two terms should approximate the NSs of English in the IC (genetic) and the OC (functional). In Yano’s view, therefore, the group of speakers of English under discussion could be referred to as *functional native speakers of Nigerian English*. Whilst this seems to have brought something new to the table, it does not entirely address the concerns raised earlier. Even if the notion of functional nativeness is accepted, more questions arise with the second term, genetic nativeness, which appears to be more controversial, as it takes us back to the biology of language.

Two other prominent WE scholars, Singh (1998) and Davies (2013), have proposed the use of “native user” in place of “native speaker,” arguing that this would address the issues associated with the latter term. For them, the distinction between a “native speaker” and a “native user” lies in the timing of language acquisition. A “native speaker” acquires the language early in life from their parents, guardians, or carers, while a “native user” learns the language as an additional language but attains excellent proficiency over time. Davies acknowledges that, aside from a potential accent difference, a “native user” can be indistinguishable from a “native speaker” in terms of education and language proficiency. This distinction, however, raises concerns about the underlying cognitive factors associated with early language acquisition, which still takes us back to the biology of language (acquisition).

Earlier conceptualisations of “native user” (e.g., McArthur, 1992; Kandiah, 1998) offered the term as an alternative to “native speaker” only in the sense that while “native speaker” prioritises speech, “native user” encompasses both speech and writing: native user is a “a term increasingly used in language teaching and applied linguistics in preference to native speaker to emphasise that language includes writing and print as well as speech” (McArthur, 1992, p. 682). In the final analysis, even if the sense in which Singh (1998) and Davies (2013) use “native user” is uncritically accepted, another problem remains: the term does not eliminate the contentious notion of nativeness inherent in the previous theories.

The last position to be considered here is the one put forward by Kperogi (2015, pp 27-28), from which the obviously implausible phrase that forms part of the title of this paper is extracted. According to Kperogi:

> the English that monolingual Nigerian children speak has all the quintessential characteristics of Nigerian English, an English-as-a-second-language variety. So who are they? I propose that they be classified as speakers of “English as a native second language.” […] Their English has all the “mother-tongue interferences” that their parents’ and teachers’ English has. Yet they do not speak any native

> Nigerian language and therefore don’t have the linguistic cognitive structures that lead to “mother tongue interference” in English. It seems to me fitting to describe them as “native speakers” of an “English-as-a-second-language” variety. The problem with this category of English speakers, though, is that their “native” status doesn’t guarantee the same level of effective communication in the language that traditional native speakers have.

Worthy of mention here is that Kperogi (2015) clearly and aptly paints an accurate picture of the sociolinguistic situation of this category of speakers in Nigeria. Moreover, he acknowledges that it is “obviously clumsy phraseology” but that “it captures the uniqueness—and, yes, clumsiness—of the sociolinguistic situation of urban, English-only, Nigerian children” (p. 27). Nonetheless, that does not absolve the term from its stark contradiction. In essence, the phrase *native speakers of English as a second language* or *speakers of English as a native second language* is a paradox. First, it conflates the concept of English as a second language, a notion which is no longer favoured in the WE paradigm, with English as a first (or native) language in the context of Outer-circle Nigeria. This is further exacerbated by implying that this category of speakers does not measure up to the native speakers of English in the Inner Circle countries, and this is portrayed as a problem. Ironically, this brings back the idea that the native speakers in the Inner Circle have the highest proficiency. In other words, IC native speakers are the true native speakers, while native speakers in the OC are illegitimate. If they must all be regarded as native speakers, what, in our view, should matter most is that they all use English to satisfy their communicative needs.

Having examined the key postulations on the characterisation of English monolinguals in the outer circle, an attempt is made in the final section below to put forward what we consider less contentious alternatives.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have attempted to characterise the English-only speakers of Nigerian English (as an example of OC speakers of English) by examining some of the established models of WE, bringing up long-debated questions about native speakerism, MT and the challenges of taxonomically defining a group of speakers who use (various forms of) English as their first and, most times, only language. This was done with a particular focus on the sociolinguistic realities in Nigeria.

Broadly speaking, our position here aligns with models that prioritise proficiency or expertise (e.g. Rampton, 1990). However, a definitive term for this controversial phenomenon remains elusive. Jenkins (2009, p. 24) avers that “it is impossible to capture the variability of English forms used in context around the world within a single term.” This perhaps accounts for why the debate has continued to engage the discipline. Nevertheless, we think that all efforts must be made to avoid ideologically loaded terms that give any form of privilege to speakers from any circles. In light of this view, therefore, our position aligns with that of Ugwuanyi (2021), who argues that it is “time to discard these ideologically loaded terms…in favour of terms such as ‘first language speakers of English,’ ‘second language speakers of English,’ ‘L1 speakers of Nigerian English,’ ‘L1 speakers of British English’,” etc (p. 214). According to the author, “[t]he advantage of these terms is that rather than focus on geography or race, the conceptualisations… [are] underlined by the sequence of acquisition, competence and the legitimacy of national varieties (which helps to advance a pluricentric and multinormative view of English)” (p. 214).

We contend that a more comprehensive understanding of varieties of Englishes can be achieved by describing their speakers based on their varied situations, contexts, and attitudes. Language situation encompasses the various linguistic, political, socio-cultural, and economic circumstances specific to (a group of) language users. This also covers the proficiency levels of these speakers, presenting a spectrum ranging from highly competent speakers at one extreme to the least competent ones at the other end (Oyebola, 2020). Contexts involve users’ participation in these situations and the appropriateness of employing relevant language varieties within these circumstances. Attitudes include overt and covert stances of the speakers towards the language as a whole, the users themselves, and the specific varieties in use. Critiques from Jenkins (2003) and Bruthiaux (2003) have been directed towards CC for its categorisation of varieties based solely on politico-historically situations, neglecting (the perceptions of) individual speakers. Despite the temptation to align with a taxonomy that prioritises the speaker, competence and contexts, we also argue that the paramount focus for WE researchers should be to investigate how these speakers define themselves—examining the identities they assign to themselves. This is particularly crucial because the boundaries between the circles may not be clearly delineated due to potential changes over time in the perceptions and attitudes towards the languages accessible to the involved communities (Kachru, 2005). This suggests that the concept of native-speakerism is increasingly attitudinal, pertaining to those who consider themselves “native” versus those who prefer to view themselves as “nonnative.”

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