

**NIGERIANISMS AND NIGERIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITIES: A  
SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS IN COMPUTER-  
MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

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**Abstract**

There is an emerging but popular trend of communication among educated Nigerians, which serve their communicative needs, on social media platforms/networks, called Nigerianisms. The concept of Nigerianisms support the variety of English called Nigerian English. Previous studies on Nigerian English have focused mainly on instances of Nigerianisms as used in Nigerian literary works, the print media and religious discourse. Despite the significance of the electronic media in terms of communication, relevance and population, relatively few studies have been dedicated to study English usage in that virtual speech community. Social media is currently the largest gathering of humans from around the world, so it is pertinent to study English as it is used on social media platforms. This study, therefore, examines the use of a variant form of English by Nigerians across different social media platforms with regards to culture and identity. Hymes' Ethnography of Communication and Herring's Computer mediated Communication were employed as the theoretical framework. The corpus for the study comprises 25 Nigerianised expressions that were purposively collected from comment sections/threads of @Instablog and @tiwasavage on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The study revealed how the emerging and popular expressions which are culture-bound have reconstructed Nigerian socio-cultural realities, experiences and identities.

**Keywords:** Nigerianisms, Nigerian English, social media platforms, culture, identity

**Introduction**

Communication is the primary purpose of language. Humans have always sought ways to communicate; to reach out to one another. Since time immemorial, human beings have always sought mediums of communication in order to strengthen human interaction and relationships. In the past, certain means of communication like town crying, letter writing, postal services, telegraphs and ravens were used. But in this twenty first century, computer-mediated communication has become the trend. Computer-mediated communication avails humans the opportunity to connect and communicate with people across long distances. When face-to-face interactions are not feasible, creative ways of communication have been made available by computer-mediated communication. One of the forms of computer-mediated communication is the social media. Social media platforms have created an entirely new way for people to communicate and share information - including pictures and videos – with each other, without distance becoming a barrier. People are also able to have virtual face-to-face conversations through video calls and face timing. The very popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These social media platforms have users from all over the world.

Due to its status as a global and prestigious language, English is the commonest language on social media platforms. Nigerian users of these social media platforms have domesticated English to suit their socio-cultural experiences, realities and Nigerianness, thereby producing new English “that is still in communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new environment” (Achebe 62) called Nigerian English. Nigerian English is a variety of world Englishes. In the process of reconciling English, which is not their native language, with their socio-cultural realities and

experiences as a people, Nigerians have been able to create contemporary expressions that are mutually intelligible on social media platforms. These expressions have gone viral. Chilwa concurs: Language as a fundamental part of a people's culture expresses that culture. Even a second or foreign language, as in the case of English in Nigeria, soon becomes indigenised to the point that a native variety emerges which inherently connects people's thoughts with that variety. Discursive practices peculiar to that society and people soon become interwoven with the language both in spoken and written forms. As Nigerian users of English acquire internet literacy, they communicate freely in NigE. In fact, NigE is so strong in its features and manifestations that in the modern digital age the internet provides simply another resource for its use and dissemination. (59)

This paper seeks to examine the degree to which this popular trend of communication among educated Nigerians, which serve their communicative needs, on social media platforms/networks, depict the experiences, realities and Nigerianness of Nigerians. It also analyses certain discursive practices on social media. Also, it seeks to ascertain the extent to which this popular trend exhibits features of Nigerian English that portray the socio-cultural context of Nigeria. This paper also further popularises new trends in social media discourse. As growing numbers of Nigerians interact daily on social media platforms and keep churning out contemporary expressions, it has become pertinent to analyse these expressions.

### **Language, Culture and Society**

Human beings come together for various reasons which are facilitated through language. The primary purpose of language is communication, so language is very indispensable and inevitable in the existence of the human race, because it serves as a means through which human beings communicate. Sapir defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (1). Bernard Bloch and George Trager believe that it is "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates" (10). The common factor in these definitions is that a language fulfils the communicative needs of its speakers.

Language is a social and cultural phenomenon. It cannot be studied outside the social context in which it is being used. Human beings are predestined to speak, we have the ability to learn a language but it takes social contact for that to take place. Noam Chomsky believes that every human being is wired with language acquisition device (LAD), a hypothetical module of the brain that accounts for a child's innate predisposition to acquire a language. This cannot take place outside society.

Language does not exist outside society. If a newborn is isolated in a solitary place where there is no language in existence, s/he will not be able to learn a language. According to Josiane Hamers and Michel Blanc, "language does not exist in itself but has a use for the overall behaviour which is meaningful in a given culture.... To some extent language is one of the variables that define culture" (8). Languages function in social settings. They express group identity. People in their small groups (families, places of work, friends) develop little changes in their languages to suit their interest. But when a larger group does the same, it becomes a sociolect (social dialect) with differences in pronunciation and use based on social factors.

### **The Reality of Nigerian English**

The English language in Nigeria belongs to the outer circle of Kachru's concentric circles where English is used as a second language. Many debates and writings have been dedicated to finding out if there is anything like Nigerian English. Many scholars and linguists belong to the school of thought that believes that it does not exist while some linguists like Ayo Bamgbose and his disciples strongly believe that it exists.

According to Bamgbose,

The question whether there is a "Nigerian English" should, at this point, have become a non-issue. For one thing, it is generally known that in a language

contact situation, particularly a close one where an exoglossic language becomes a second language with an official role in a country, the second language is bound to be influenced by its linguistic and cultural environment. (99)

He reiterates:

In a language contact situation such as exists in Nigeria, it is to be expected that there will be an interaction between the vernaculars and English ... the influence of the vernaculars on English is more relevant here, especially in view of the earlier discussion of local variants in Nigerian English. Basically, what happens is that patterns of the local languages - phonological, grammatical and lexical- tend to be transferred into English. (47)

This variety of English has been termed a debased form of English, a make-shift language, language of illiterates, mutually unintelligible language and others. Some educated Nigerians have denied the existence and use of Nigerian English but Farooq Kperogi has this to say:

By Nigerian English --- I mean the variety of English that is broadly spoken and written by our literary, intellectual, political, and media elite across the regional and ethnic spectrum of Nigeria ---. But this is true of all 'standard' varieties of all 'modern' languages in the world. What is called British Standard English, for instance, is no more than the idiosyncratic usage of the language by the English royalty and by the political, intellectual, literary, and media elite of the country. (37)

Language is fashioned to meet the communicative needs of the people that use it whilst serving as a source of group identity. It is indispensable in the expression of culture. This is the ultimate test of the effectiveness of a variety of language. So, should a region develop its own standard of an international language? Will it result in mutual unintelligibility?

According to Rosarri Mbisike,

Do we then as Nigerians share a common cultural experience with the British people? If yes, then we would be justified to use an imitation of the British standard. But if no, which is the case, we definitely should have a 'standard' that should depict our cultural experience. Every language and even age has social, economic, political and cultural factors. (31)

Nigerian English is a "conglomeration of legitimate variants of English in Nigeria, which retain intelligibility, reflects a common Nigerian culture or perception of the world has a mother tongue influence and a common socio-political environment" (2). Nigerian English emerged and evolved due to the nativisation of English language in Nigeria, so it can be defined as the type of English spoken and used by Nigerians. According to Awonusi:

The domestication of the English language in Nigeria for over four centuries, particularly its use in the educational system and colonial administration over a century ago has resulted in the use of the language in the country in domains different from those of native- speaker of communities like USA, the UK and Australia. (67)

Many speakers of English in Nigeria believe that Nigerian English is a bastardised form of the standard British English. But the truth of the matter is that English, having left its original abode to migrate to Nigeria, has been affected by society, culture and indigenous languages in Nigeria. Nigerians can now lay claim to English as their own language owing to its nativisation. "The irony, however, is that no Nigerian who was educated at home, including those who deride Nigerian English can avoid speaking or writing it either consciously or unconsciously" (Kperogi 37).

The globalisation of English, on the other hand, is responsible for the various emerging varieties of world Englishes which Nigerian English is one of them. The concept of Nigerianisms support the variety of English called Nigerian English. "Nigerianisms are the transfer of characteristics of Nigerian Indigenous languages (NIL), the source languages, to Target Language (TL), English" (Sonde 1439). According to Chiluwa, "in the history of the English language certain developments have left significant linguistic marks on the language. As new developments and cultural forms occur, new words and styles of expression evolve with them and spread" (39). He further says:

The concept of Nigerianness in English language use (Chiluwa 2008a) recognizes the fact that language is sensitive to its context (Halliday 1978). The English language in Nigeria, though still in the process of domestication/nativisation, has developed local varieties as well as register differences with some cultural and institutional distinctions. These varieties are marked by new words and expressions that reflect new ways of perceiving and constructing the environment. (44)

### Theoretical Framework

The theories for this work are Ethnography of Communication by Dell Hymes and Computer-Mediated Discourse by Susan Herring. Ethnography of communication studies communication within social and cultural practices and beliefs. “Scholars pursuing EC view language as an important and integral part of social life and cultural activity... Moreover, EC holds that the tight reciprocal interrelations between language and sociocultural domains of life rest on the fact that language appears as an activity”. (Noy 2) Hymes believes that language cannot be studied in isolation, that is, outside its social and cultural contexts. It has to be studied in relation to its wider context of cultural and social facets. Language should not be limited to certain rules. In fact, languages have specific contexts that can be traced to individual and cultural norms and beliefs. Language and its cultural context should not be disbanded. Hymes further develops two components of EOC as means of speech and speech economy. Carbaugh concurs:

The ethnography of communication (EC) is an approach to language and social interaction. EC seeks to discover the cultural particularities and general principles of communication. The particularities are demonstrated through cultural analyses of communication practices; in addition to the particularities, the generalities are established typically through comparative study. The approach foregrounds locally situated means and meanings of communication as its primary analytical concern. There are four philosophical assumptions in EC about communication, language, and social interaction: (1) communication is what people have made of it; (2) communication exhibits systemic social organization; (3) communication, language and social interaction are deeply and radically cultural; (4) and communication is formative of social and cultural lives. (par. 1)

Means of speech refers to “the features that enter into styles, as well as the styles themselves”, while speech economy refers to “the relationships within a speech community where the people use their means of speech”. Furthermore, Hymes develops the speaking model. This model analyses speech in cultural contexts. It comprises sixteen parts that are further divided into eight categories namely;

S – setting and scene – the physical location where the speech takes place

P – participants –the people who take part in the speech

E – ends – the purpose and the outcome of the speech

A – act sequence – the speech acts and the sequence in which they are carried out

K – key – the tone and manner in which the speech is carried out

I – instrumentalities – the medium of communication that is used

N – norms of interaction – the rules of speech, interaction and interpretation

G – genres – the ‘type’ of speech and its cultural contexts

The second theory for this research is Computer-Mediated Discourse by Susan Herring.

According to Herring,

Computer-mediated discourse is the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers. The study of computer-mediated discourse (henceforth CMD) is a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication (CMC), distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus. (1)

“CMDA is a framework that describes properties of online discourse, including the social and contextual factors that shape it” (Chiluwa 44). Computer-Mediated discourse focuses on orthography,

words, utterances and threads like online threads and trolling. “What defines CMDA at its core is the analysis of logs of verbal interaction (characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, archives, etc.). In the broadest sense, any analysis of online behavior that is grounded in empirical, textual observations is computer-mediated discourse analysis” (Herring par.3). CMD can be applied to four domains of language use namely; structure, meaning, interaction and social behaviour.

### Data and Methodology

This research is a qualitative research. The corpus comprises 25 Nigerianised expressions that were purposively collected- through screenshots- from comment sections/threads of @Instablog and @tiwasavage. These are social media pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These social media pages have an avalanche of young people that follow them on social media, for example, On instagram, @instablog has 3.6m followers and @tiwasavage has 12.5m followers as at 8 July 2021. These social media users are perceived to be in their 20s and 30s. The data that were purposively collected from the comment sections of these social media accounts through screenshots include:

- 1) ment
- 2) cruise
- 3) zaddy
- 4) fam
- 5) sub
- 6) church mind
- 7) village people
- 8) wife material
- 9) Yoruba demon
- 10) full chest
- 11) table shaking
- 12) side chic
- 13) broke shaming
- 14) the baby girl life
- 15) oga at the top
- 16) small girl; big God
- 17) shoot your shot
- 18) shift goal post
- 19) We die here.
- 20) Make I blow powder?
- 21) Don't air me.
- 22) E choke.
- 23) I can't kill myself.
- 24) I am in my house, come and beat me.
- 25) Where una dey see this money? Make una cut soap for me na.

### Analysis of Data

#### 1. ment

*Ment* is the short form of mental, as in, mental health. In Nigeria, mental health problems are equated with madness. On social media, *ment* is a form of insult which is usually used when one's opinion does not resonate with that of another. It is used to berate another person's stand on issues in order to show that the person is crazy. The popular sentence 'no be ment' is used to question people's sanity.

#### 2. cruise

On social media, *cruise* represents an unserious situation; a situation where people do not take life seriously. Present day Nigeria is also referred to as a cruise country.

#### 3. zaddy

A *zaddy* is a rich influential older man; especially one that bankrolls younger women.

#### 4. fam

*Fam* is the short form of family. On social media, fam(ily) represents the followers and friends of a social media user.

#### 5. sub

A *sub* is a social media post that is targeted at vilifying another person. It is used to attack the opinions of another user, and it is done in such a way that the owner of the *sub* is not categorically stated, although inferences are bound to be made.

#### 6. church mind

This expression is rooted in religion. *Church mind* is a pure mind that is filled with love. When a social media user asks another user to apply 'church mind' in a situation, s/he is being asked to be loving, considerate, kind and merciful.

#### 7. village people

In the Nigerian society, everyone has a village/hometown. Educated Nigerians live in the cities and visit their villages occasionally especially during festive periods. The people that settle in the villages are referred to as *village people*; literally. It is believed that these village people are jealous of their relatives that live in cities, so they use diabolical means in to attack their relatives. On social media, the definition of village people is broader. Detractors are generally called village people on social media.

#### 8) wife material

A *wife material* is an unmarried lady that is diligent, resourceful, hardworking and, most importantly, frugal. She possesses all the qualities that Nigerian men look out for in potential wives.

#### 9) Yoruba demon

A *Yoruba demon* is a Yoruba man that is rich and always looks dapper. He is the delight of unmarried ladies. But he is also known for being sweet tongued and deceitful. The demonization of a Yoruba man has nothing to do with the concept of demon in the Christian religion.

10) full chest

To support something with a *full chest* means to give an unwavering support towards that thing. To say something with (your) full chest means to speak with a high level of confidence not minding whose ox is gored.

11) table shaking

Table shaking means to be controversial; to tread paths less travelled without fear of backlash.

12) side chic

A *side chic* is a female love interest of an unfaithful partner especially a partner that is married. It is synonymous with edible catering and small chops.

13) broke shaming

To broke shame means to shame someone for his or her lack of financial ability. Men are usually at the receiving end.

14) the baby girl life

*The baby girl life* is the stress free life. Any lady that lives the baby girl life lives life to the fullest; unapologetically. It is the opposite of wife material. This type of lifestyle is exclusive to ladies. It is the opposite of the 'be seen and not heard' societal expectations of women.

15) small girl; big God

A small girl that has a big 'god' is a lady that has all her needs met by a man. The big god is usually a very rich (married) man.

16) shoot your shot

To shoot your shot means to woo someone. It is usually used when ladies get to woo men, although this is not the norm. On social media, this is usually done by sending the male love interest a private message.

17) shift goal position

To shift goal post means to speak from two sides of the mouth. The speaker tends to change opinions at will to suit the situation at hand.

18) We die here.

This sentence was popularized by the Multi-choice reality show called Big Brother Nigeria. It was a popular statement by the 2018 winner of the reality show, Miracle, whilst the show was still on. It represents the persistence and doggedness that Nigerians are known for.

19) Make I blow powder?

This sentence is rooted in traditional religion, but social media users from different religions use it. It is believed, in traditional religion, that a traditionalist can, by blowing a powdery substance into air, make someone do his or her bidding. Social media users also use it for advert, e.g., You no go buy from me abi make I blow powder?

21) Don't air me.

Don't air me means don't expose me. Do not say on social media what I told you in private.

22) E choke.

*E choke* originated from Davido, a Nigerian musician. It is used when someone is held up in a tight situation. It can also be used by someone to express shock or surprise.

24) I can't kill myself.

This sentence originates from Timaya's song *I Can't Kill Myself*. Considering the living conditions in Nigeria, the expression is used when people want to flex, that is, enjoy themselves. It can also be used when one has done one's best in a situation, yet results are not forthcoming. All that avails, in such a situation, is to give up.

25) Where una dey see this money? Make una cut soap for me na.

This is rooted in finances/religion. Most Nigerians believe in money rituals.

Nollywood, on the other hand, keeps churning out movies with themes of money ritual, thereby making Nigerians believe it exists. Allegedly, one of the methods of money ritual is by bathing with a special soap in a river. So, when people flaunt their rich lifestyles on social media, some people believe that the wealth was acquired through money rituals. On a lighter note, whenever someone

makes a finance related post, commenters ask him/her to cut soap for them. This means that the person should be a financial mentor to them.

### Conclusion

The researcher discovered that certain expressions, which are rooted in socio-cultural experiences of Nigerians, have achieved ubiquity on social media platforms. Social media, on the other hand, has created a virtual speech community where these expressions thrive. Language and culture are inseparable. English has existed in Nigeria, for decades, and has interacted with the people's culture and traditions. It has also existed alongside other indigenous languages. This co-habitation and linguistic interaction has produced Nigerianisms. This variety is being popularised by computer-mediated communication. Computer-mediated communication has provided a platform for the popularisation and dissemination of Nigerianisms through certain contemporary expressions. These expressions are definitely rooted in the socio-cultural experiences of Nigerians, so that is why they are termed Nigerianisms. They help Nigerians locate and explore their Nigerianness without apologies. The fact that some of the expressions are written in Nigerian Pidgin also shows their Nigerianness, because Nigerian Pidgin is the unofficial lingua franca in Nigeria used by the educated and uneducated depending on the social situations they find themselves in. Considering the fact that social media is the largest gathering of humans all over the world, Nigerians avail themselves of the opportunity to showcase their country in a positive light. This study also shows that Nigerianisms/Nigerian English is not an example of bad English. Nigerian English is an innovation; an example of a creative language.

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