

PHONOLOGICAL USE OF THE WEAK FORMS OF PREPOSITIONS BY THE EDUCATED IGBO SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The spread and use of the English language has brought about varieties in the language which is reflective of its geographical spread and contact with the local languages. One area that is greatly affected by the contact between the English language and the local languages is pronunciation. This study examines the phonological use of the weak forms of prepositions among the educated Igbo speakers of English. The study also examines gender differences in the phonological use of the weak forms of prepositions. Sixty educated Igbo speakers of English as a second language comprising thirty males and thirty females who have no less than two years of post secondary education selected through a purposive random sampling technique participated in the study. The data were collected by getting the subjects to read a passage that contains prepositions that are supposed to be pronounced in their weak forms in connected speech into a recording device and was analysed perceptually. The study which relied on Labov's theory of variation observed that educated Igbo speakers of English manifested variation in their production of weak forms when compared with RP. The study also observed that there is no gender differences in the manner in which educated male and female Igbo speakers produced the weak forms of the English prepositions

Keywords: The Strong and Weak Forms, Variation Theory, The English Grammatical Words

Introduction

Many centuries ago, the English language was a local language spoken mainly by monolinguals within the shores of Britain. But today, the English language is a global language. The spread and use of the English language has brought about varieties in the language which is reflective of its geographical spread and contact with the local languages. One area that is greatly affected by the contact between the English language and the local languages is pronunciation. Okoro (159) attests that 'geographical and regional varieties of English are usually most noticeable on the level of phonology'. The works of Labov (1963) and (1966) which were attempts to track the social variations of the features of a language have been inspiring researchers to map the differences between Standard British Usage (RP) and regional varieties, and to account for the linguistic and social variables that are responsible for the observed differences.

A characteristic feature of natural connected speech in the English language is the weakening of grammatical words (also referred to as function words). The English grammatical words are realised in two ways in the spoken form. They could be realised in the strong form or in the weak form. Suffice to say that the English grammatical words undergo a set of modifications in natural connected speech. The modifications in natural connected speech of the English grammatical words are not arbitrarily done. It is context specific. There are certain contexts where only the strong form is acceptable and others where the weak form is the normal pronunciation. Why is it important to learn how weak forms are used? Roach provides answers to the question and it is worth quoting in extenso:

There are two reasons; first, most native speakers of English find an 'all strong-form' pronunciation unnatural and foreign sounding, something that most learners would wish to avoid. Second, and more importantly, speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms are likely to have difficulty understanding speakers who do use the weak forms; since practically all native speakers of British English use them, learners of the language need to learn about these weak forms to help them understand what they hear. (Roach, 112)

The Igbo speech community which is located in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria is made up of people that are highly educated, averagely educated and non-educated. The English language is their second language and their window to the world. The Igbo people, especially the educated ones, use the English language in the international community and in Nigeria for among other things, the purpose of academic exploits, trade, workshop, tourism, diplomacy, official governmental businesses etc. expectedly, they are supposed to use the weak forms of the grammatical words of the English language properly so as to enhance mutual intelligibility in their conversations with people internationally and within the country. Bearing in mind that speakers who are not familiar with the use of weak forms are likely to have difficulty understanding speakers who do use the weak forms, as well as the need to avoid sounding unnatural before the competent users of weak forms, this study sets out to investigate and characterize the phonological use of weak forms by educated Igbo speakers of English with focus on pronouns across social variables of age and gender.

Research questions

The following questions will guide the study:

- i. How do educated Igbo speakers of English pronounce the weak forms of prepositions?
- ii. What is the level of gender differences in the articulation of the weak forms among the educated Igbo speakers of English?

The English Grammatical words

Yadugiri (68) explains the English grammatical words as those words that do not have a dictionary meaning in the way that we normally expects nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs to have. These grammatical words are auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, determiners and pronouns. The English grammatical words serve as grammatical cement holding content words together. They help to maintain relationships between higher syntactic units such as phrases and clauses. In other words, the English grammatical words are used to express structural relationship with other words in a sentence. In sum, one can say that the English grammatical words have little semantic content of its own and chiefly indicate a grammatical relationship among words in a sentence.

The Strong and the Weak Forms

As already hinted in the subsection above, the English grammatical words manifest in two ways in their spoken form – the strong and the weak forms. The strong form is stressed and it is the pronunciation form that is usually found in the dictionary entry of word. Suffice to say that the strong forms are produced with greater muscular energy and thus more prominent when compared with the weak forms. Laoubi (35) states that it is the first form to which foreign learners of English are introduced.

On the other hand, the weak forms are unstressed, less prominent and phonemically different from the strong form in quality. The common way of weakening grammatical words is reduction in vowel quality. This is done usually by the replacement of the word's vowel by a weaker one mainly the schwa /ə/ sound. Besides, weakening of grammatical words may be caused by change of consonants and appearance of syllabic consonants. For Roach (112), this variance in pronunciation is a significant characteristic of the way English pronunciation is modified.

The Reasons for Weakening Grammatical Words

There are a number of reasons for the weakening of English grammatical words. The reasons are usually linked to the supra-segmental aspects of English. One of the reasons for weakening grammatical words is to achieve regularity in the rhythm of English. The English language is a stress-timed language. This means that it is the number of stressed syllables in an English utterance that usually determines the time it would take to say the utterance. It also means that at the sentence level, there is an equal interval between stressed syllables. To maintain the rhythmic regularity of the English language, Laoubi (22) affirms that some syllables have to be compressed in a way that fits this 'rhythm'. He further affirms that the English grammatical words of English are normally reduced to achieve the rhythmic regularity of the language. Suffice it to say that inappropriate pronunciation of

the weak forms distorts the rhythm of the English speech and therefore could lead to constant misunderstanding. Spoken English owes its rhythm to the appropriate use of the strong and the weak forms.

Furthermore, weakening of the English grammatical words is a logical result of appropriate application of English sentence-stress which helps in conveying the appropriate meaning to the listener. Laoubi (22) states that regular weakening of the grammatical words helps the listener to perceive the prominent (stressed) words in the text and, thus, getting a correct interpretation of the intended meaning. If we stress all the words in a sentence, the prominent feature in the speech will be compromised and there would be no distinction between stressed and unstressed words which will affect the intended meaning of the utterance.

In addition, the grammatical words are weakened because they convey little information when compared to content words. In connected speech uttered in English, content words are usually stressed because they carry the semantic load of the sentences. Take for instance the sentence: 'I ... student ... Nnamdi Azikiwe University.' In the sentence, even if the grammatical words are omitted, we can understand its meaning. Content words convey all the meaning and are, consequently, more important. Therefore, the weakening of the grammatical words is attributed to the little information they convey in sentences.

Besides, weakening of the grammatical words helps to achieve ease in pronunciation. When we produce all the grammatical words in a sentence in strong form, it negatively affects our economy of speech production which affects ease of pronunciation. During sound production in connected speech, speakers modify their speech sounds in different contexts in order to facilitate ease of pronunciation. Weakening the grammatical words is one way of achieving ease in pronunciation in connected speech.

The Strong and Weak Phonological forms of the English Grammatical words (Prepositions)

(a) Prepositions	Strong Form	Weak Form
To	/tu:/	/tə/
For	/fɔ:/	/fə/ before consonants /fər/ before vowels
Of	/ɒv/	/əv/
At	/æt/	/ət/
From	/frɒm/	/frəm/
As	/æz/	/əz/
Than	/ðæn/	/ðən/

The Contexts for Using Strong and Weak Phonological forms

The English grammatical words are used in the weak forms in all parts of the sentence except:

- i. when they occur at the end of a sentence. Example:
I'm fond of chips [aɪm fɒnd əv ʃɪps]
Chips are what I'm fond of [ʃɪps ə wɒt aɪm fɒnd əv]
- ii. when they are used for contrastive effect. Example:
Is this train from Awka? [ɪz ðɪz treɪn frəm ɔ:kə]
It is not the train from Awka, it is the train to Awka [ɪt ɪz nɒt ðə treɪn frɒm ɔ:kə ɪt ɪz ðə treɪn tu: ɔ:kə]
The letter's from him, not to him [ðə letəz frɒm ɪm nɒt tu: ɪm]
- iii. where prepositions are co-ordinated. Example
The trains to and from Awka are always crowded. [ðə treɪnz tu: ən frɒm ɔ:kə ə ɔ:lweɪz kraʊdɪd]
A work of and about literature [ə wɜ:k əv ən əbaʊt lɪtərəʃə]
- iv. when they are being "cited" or "quoted" in contrast to being "used"

Let us study how “the” and “a” are used in English. [let əs st^ɑdɪ hau ðɪ: ən eɪ ə ju:zd ɪn ɪŋɡlɪʃ]

You shouldn’t put “and” at the end of a sentence. [ju ʃudnt put ænd ət ðɪ end əv ə sentens]

Another point to remember is that when the weak-form words whose spelling begins with “h” (e.g. ‘her’, ‘have’) occur at the beginning of a sentence, the pronunciation is with initial **h**, even though this is usually omitted in other contexts. (adapted from Roach 2000, Yadugiri 2008, Akinjobi, 2009)

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the variation theory propounded by William Labov (1963, 1966). The theory holds that language is in constant process of change, and this change diffuses over geographical, social and linguistic spaces of users. The main goal of variation theory is to account for the variations that exist in language use across individuals and speech communities. The theory is built on the idea that language is inherently variable at different structural levels of phonology, morphology and syntax and that it is a generally recognized fact that no two utterances of the same word by the same speaker are ever exactly alike. The same language varies from speaker to speaker or from community to community.

The speaker variables commonly used for this purpose are socioeconomic class, age of the speaker, sex (gender) of the speaker, ethnic group of speaker and social network. This study is however restricted to the social variables of gender and age. The strength of this theory lies in its ability to help researchers gain insight from studying language from a socially realistic perspective that takes into account how diverse range of speakers use the language in everyday situations. Thus the theory does not rely on the intuition of a native speaker but rather relies on observing naturally produced speech.

Methodology

The study adopted descriptive research design. The data for this study were collected from 60 educated Igbo speakers of English in Anambra state who had no less than two years of post secondary education. The study adopted a purposive random sampling technique in selecting the subjects to meet the social variables of age and gender. The subjects of the study were made up of 30 males and 30 females. For the social variable of age, the subjects were made up of 30 young (17years – 40years) Igbo speakers of English and 30 old (41years and above) Igbo speakers of English. The instruments for data collection were questionnaire that sought information on gender and age bracket of the subjects and a reading passage. A recording device was used in recording the reading passage as the subjects were reading and analysed perceptually. An appropriate use of weak forms was allotted one mark and the total score for all the participants was converted to a percentage.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: How do educated Igbo speakers of English pronounce the weak forms of prepositions?

Table 1: The realization of the weak forms of prepositions by educated Igbo speakers of English.

Words	RP	Number of Educated Igbo Speakers variants (60)	Percentage of Educated Igbo English Variants
To	[tə]	30 28 2	[tʊ] 50% [to] 47% [tə] 3%
For	[fə], [fər]	56 4	[fə] 93% [fər] 7%
Of	[əv]	60	[ɔf] 100%
At	[ət]	58	[at] 97%

		2	[ət] 3%
From	[frəm]	56 4	[frəm] 93% [frəm] 7%
As	[əz]	56 4	[as] 93% [əz] 7%
Than	[ðən]	4 56	[ðən] 7% [dan] 93%

In Standard English, **to** is realised as [tə] in English sentences where it is supposed to be realised in the weak form. Table 1 shows that only 3% of the subjects realised **to** as [tə]. 50% of the subjects realised **to** as [tʊ] while 47% of the subjects realised **to** as [to]. The preposition **for** which is expected to be realised as [fə] or [fər] (before vowels) in the contexts of weak forms was realised as [fɔ] by 93% of the subjects while only 7% of the subjects realised **for** as [fər] before vowels. As regards the preposition **of**, all the subjects realised the word as [ɒf]. The word **at** is supposed to be realised as [ət] in sentences in Standard English. Just 3% of the subjects realised the word as [ət] while 97% of the subjects realised the word **at** as [at]. The preposition **from** which is expected to be realised as [frəm] in the context of weak form in Standard English is realised by 7% of the subjects as [frəm] while 93% of the subjects realised **from** as [frəm]. Where the word **as** is expected to be realised as [əz], 93% of the subjects realised the word as [as]. Only 7% of the subjects realised the sound as [əz]. For the word **than** which is expected to be realised as [ðən] in Standard English, only 7% of the subjects realised it as [ðən] while 93% of the subjects realised it as [dan].

Obviously from the table, there is variation in the phonological use of weak forms by the educated Igbo speakers of English when compared with RP. The findings are in line with the findings of Akinjobi (2009) who studied the use of the weak forms of the English grammatical words by educated Yoruba English speakers in Nigeria and reported variation in the articulation of the weak forms when compared with RP. It seems therefore that the variation observed among Igbo speakers of English studied upholds the core tenet of Labov’s theory which believes that language is in constant process of change, and this change diffuses over geographical, social and linguistic spaces of users.

Research Question 2: What is the level of gender differences in the articulation of the weak forms among the educated Igbo speakers of English.

Table 2: Male and Female Realization of Weak Forms by Educated Igbo Users of English

Word	RP	Number of Male Educated Igbo Speakers Variation (30)	Male Educated Igbo English Variants	Number of Female Educated Igbo Speakers Variation (30)	Female Educated Igbo English Variants
To	[tə]	15 14 1	[tʊ] 50% [to] 47% [tə] 3%	15 14 1	[tʊ] 50% [to] 47% [tə] 3%
For	[fə], [fər]	28 2	[fɔ] 93% [fər] 7%	28 2	[fɔ] 93% [fər] 7%
Of	[əv]	30	[ɒf] 100%	30	[ɒf] 100%
At	[ət]	29 1	[at] 97% [ət] 3%	29 1	[at] 97% [ət] 3%

From	[frəm]	28	[frəm] 93% [frəm] 7%	28	[frəm] 93% [frəm] 7%
As	[əz]	28	[as] 93% [əz] 7%	28	[as] 93% [əz] 7%
Than	[ðən]	2	[ðən] 7% [dan] 93%	2	[ðən] 7% [dan] 93%
		28		28	

From table 2 above, it is observed that when compared to RP, male and female participants manifested variations in the articulation of weak forms. It is equally observed that there are no gender differences in the realization of weak forms by the educated Igbo users of the English language. One would, therefore, conclude that both male and female educated Igbo speakers of English who were subjects of this study are at the same in the realization of the weak forms of the English language in sentences particularly with reference to prepositions which is the focus of this study.

Summary of Findings

The investigation of the use of the weak forms of prepositions shows that the educated Igbo speakers of English have problem with the pronunciation of weak forms of prepositions as they manifested variation in their use of the weak forms when compared with RP. The study equally observed that there is no gender difference in the realization of the weak forms of the prepositions.

Conclusion

The study sets out to investigate the phonological use of the weak forms of prepositions among the educated Igbo speakers of English. The study also investigated gender dimension to the use of the weak forms of prepositions. The study used Labov's variation theory. From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the educated Igbo speakers of English manifested variation in their use of the weak forms of prepositions when compared with RP. This study therefore upholds the core tenet of Labov's theory which believes that language is in constant process of change, and this change diffuses over geographical, social and linguistic spaces of users.

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