

# The English Language and Spelling Pronunciation: A Case Study of the Phenomenon in Esan

**Felix O. Okunsebor**

*Department of English and Literature,  
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.*

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper examines five types of spelling pronunciation that are replete in the English of Esan speakers. It seeks to investigate reasons why spelling pronunciation has become phenomenal and its possible panacea. It captures the nature of English phonology, which is admmissive of its inconsistency. While it upholds the tenets of the theory of structural phonology, it admonishes the learner on areas of possible pitfalls and how to avoid them. It is argued that spelling pronunciation in Esan is part of the variety of English christened Nigerian English, and concludes by averring that spelling reform, proper teaching and proper learning are the remedies for spelling pronunciation.*

**Keywords:** Spelling pronunciation, English phonology, English of Esan speakers, reform, teaching, learning

## **Introduction**

This paper is a novel attempt at investigating the phenomenon of spelling pronunciation in Esan. We have attempted to look at the concept of spelling pronunciation, types, causes and possible remedies of the phenomenon in Esan. RP also called BBC English or the Queen's English is equated in this study with English. The other dialects of English spoken in Great Britain are not considered in this presentation.

It is also assumed that English is too popular to warrant an introduction. Esan, on the other hand, is less studied and, therefore, requires some introduction. Esan is an Edoid language of the Kwa group of languages, and it straddles the five local councils in Edo

Central Senatorial District of Nigeria. The approval of Esan orthography by the National Language Centre (NLC), a distinct unit of the Educational Services Division of the Federal Ministry of Education, in 1987 marks a major breakthrough in the development of the Esan language.

The first contact between English and Esan is traceable to the advent of the colonial administration in Nigeria. Through education and religion, the spread of English spiralled to different parts of Esan land. Adetugbo agrees wholesale that English came into Nigeria through education and colonial administration (194). At the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern protectorates in Nigeria, several schools, with the first founded in 1905, (Okojie 589), churches, law courts and health-care units had been built in every nook and cranny of Esan land. English has since emerged as the second language (L<sub>2</sub>) of many Esan speakers. This contact has snowballed into bilingual education in which Esan has been taught and studied up to College of Education, and English has become a second language to many Esan speakers. The form of English spoken by Esan speakers, however, is different from that of the (L<sub>1</sub>) native speakers of the language. One difference we have identified in this paper is spelling pronunciation which has influenced the English of Esan speakers.

### **Research Method**

The data for this study are drawn from four sources: (a) available literature (b) dictionaries and transcription (c) recordings (d) researcher's observation over the period of five years. In the course of gathering these data, this researcher administered a list of English words (questionnaire) to some Esan speakers who have some 'mastery' of English (graduates of universities) and to other Esan speakers who have only a smattering of English. On the whole, 100 respondents, fifty from each side, were required to pronounce the words as naturally as they could. Series of conversations were also recorded without the speakers' awareness, all of which were later transcribed by the researcher. RP was used as the benchmark in deciding deviation.

Although this researcher is a phonemic speaker (native speaker) of Esan, with a considerable knowledge of English, (and so is able to identify and predict pitfalls for Esan speakers), yet ‘errors’ were elicited from selected native speakers in order to give an empirical tone to this research. Lado’s seminal text *Linguistics across Cultures* was particularly resourceful in this research effort.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Spelling Pronunciation*

The divergence evident in the English of a native speaker and the English of a Nigerian speaker is a manifestation of spelling pronunciation. (The Nigerian speaker is typified in this paper by Esan speaker). Spelling pronunciation, according to O’ Connor, is “bringing the pronunciation into line with orthography” (145). Bailey sees “spelling pronunciation” as “pronunciation imitating the spelling” (201). Spelling pronunciation is phenomenal in Esan in tandem with Firth’s remarks that spelling pronunciation is “increasingly common” (198). To Fronkin and Rodman, spelling has influenced “standard pronunciation” (527), just as it has influenced the English of the Esan speaker. Awonusi then sums this up: Nigerians commonly use the sounds of their native languages when speaking in English especially for sounds not available in the native or indigenous languages (207).

Many scholars have examined the phenomenon of spelling pronunciation and interference, and this scrutiny has sharpened the anticipation for a research into Esan phonology. Specifically, Okon Esien’s effort at discovering how code mixing has taken a toll in Ibibio, whets the researcher’s appetite for this exercise – i.e. finding out how Esan language has also been infested by spelling pronunciation. Even when the data presented by earlier scholars are similar at some point to those of Esan, they are not exactly comparable. This is a rather innovative study as most of the features identified here are specific to Esan English.

The model of phonology used in this paper is structural phonology. Structural or taxonomic phonology came into the limelight in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it predates Noams Chomsky’s generative phonology. The general thrust of the structural theory is that language

should be described as it is (descriptive), and not how it ought to be (prescriptive). It also has the aim of setting out phoneme systems, combinational possibilities of phonemes (phonotactics) and non-distinctive variations of these units in different languages.

### *Causes of Spelling Pronunciation*

- (i) The relationship between spelling and pronunciation is arbitrary. Spelling is not a direct reflection of pronunciation in English.
- (ii) Certain spelling pronunciations occur because the speaker follows spellings too closely. Gondin and Mammen therefore advise that “A careful speaker would have looked them up in a dictionary rather than guessing at the pronunciation from the spelling” (181).
- (iii) RP’s (English) lack of consistency in the sound values it attributes (Jowitt 85) is largely responsible for spelling pronunciation.
- (iv) Missionary education in Southern Nigeria, according to Jibril, “merely provided basic literacy which encouraged spelling pronunciation” (“Diachrony” 8).
- (v) Spelling pronunciations are made under the false assumption that there are virtually no rules transforming underlying representations into surface phones (Bailey 201).

### **Types of Spelling Pronunciation**

#### **(a) Orthographic Spelling Pronunciation**

English pronunciation is far from being “learner friendly”. Consider the following examples: The English grapheme “o” is /əʊ/ in *so*, *gross*; /ə/ in *police*, *oblige*; /ʌ/ in *son*, *love*; /ɒ/ in *clock*, *boss*, /ɔ:/ in *glory*, *story*; /u:/ in *do*, *womb*; /ɪ/ in *women* /wɪmɪn/, and /ʊ/ in *woman*, *wolf*. In Esan, as in many other Nigerian languages, [o] is represented by one grapheme “o”. Thus the Esan speaker is at the mercy of the overt divergence between Esan and English. This accounts for the spelling pronunciation in the words: *gross*, *police*, *oblige*, *son*, *love*, *glory*, *story*, *wolf*.

Again, RP’s lack of consistency, as reported by Jowitt, is evident in the graphemes “eo” in *Leonard*, *leopard*, *jeopardy* and *Geoffrey*,

which are pronounced as /e/ in RP, but the graphemes “eo” in *theocracy*, *theology*, *geography*, *Theophilus*, *theory*, *theorem*, *theosophy*, *Theodora*, *Cleopatra* and even *Leo* are pronounced as /ɒ/ or /iə/. It follows then that RP contrives obscurity in order to mystify its phonology. The unwary learner of English (e.g. Esan speaker) simply pronounces ‘eo’ as spelt, thus /liɒnəd/, /liɒpəd/ /dʒiɒpɑːdɪ/ and /dʒiɒfri/ respectively.

The letter “a” which RP renders as /ɒ/ poses pitfalls for the unsuspecting Esan speaker. In English for example, “a” is phonemically realized as /æ/ in *that*, *fat*, *cat*, *rat*, *bag*, *sack*, *sat*, *back*, *chat*, *bat*, *pack*. The “a” in the above words is realized phonetically in Esan as [a]. Surprisingly, English uses /ɒ/ for letter “a” in *swamp*, *want*, *wand*, *swarm*, *swallow*, *swap*, *wallow*, *wasp*, *waddled*, *squalor*. Just as the Esan speaker is already used to “a’ for apple”, he simply pronounces these above ten italicized words with [a] instead of the English /ɒ/, in line with their spellings. This is perhaps why Mackey advises the learner to “learn which one (letter) to use for each sound” (283). Ignorance is not an excuse in law, so this advice given by Mackey becomes instructive. But how do we explain that the Esan speaker pronounces the above words about the same way as they are pronounced in American English? We should perhaps leave this to another field of research. To come back to our spelling pronunciation, out of the 100 speakers in our Esan example, 80 manifest orthographic spelling pronunciation in all the words given to them to read. The other 20 speakers are able to read the RP pronunciation of some words correctly.

### **(b) Phonologically Syncopated Consonants**

Another dominant feature of spelling pronunciation in Esan is the English syncopated (silent) consonant which is retained or pronounced by the Esan speaker. Some English consonants are silent in certain context(s) of the word. That is to say that the silent consonants are not pronounced though they are present in spelling. This is one area which the Esan speaker of English finds completely *sui generis*. From our data, “b” is silent in the English words: *lamb* /læm/, *womb* /wu:m/, *climb* /klaɪm/, *bomb* /bɒm/, *plumb(er)* /plʌm(ə)/, *limb* /lɪm/, *thumb*

/θʌm/, numb /nʌm/, crumb /krʌm/, dumb /dʌm/, tomb /tu:m/, comb /kəʊm/, succumb /səkʌm/, aplomb /əplɒm/, debt /det/, subtle /sʌtl/.

Also, “t” is silent in the following English words: apostle /əpɒsl/, epistle /ɪpɪsl/, castle /kɑ:sl/, wrestle /resl/, whistle, /wɪsl/, hustle /hʌsl/, bustle /bʌsl/, postpone /pɒspəʊn/, soften /sɒfʌ/, fasten /fa:sn/, bouquet /bu:keɪ/, moisten /mɔɪsn/, listen /lɪsn/, pestle /pesl/, depot /depəʊ/, rapport /ræpɔ:/, Renault /renəʊ/, Peugeot /pɜ:ʒəʊ/, waistcoat /weɪskəʊt/, mustn’t /mʌsnt/, chestnut /tʃesnʌt/. However, to the Esan speaker, the silent letters, shown above, are distinctive (not redundant) both in spelling and pronunciation. As in the above examples, the Esan speaker adds the /b/ or the /t/ where it should be silent.

Again, the irregular nature of English sounds is exhibited here. In English, for instance, “t” is dropped (silent) in apostle /əpɒsl/ (as we have seen above), but distinctive or retained in apostolic /æpɒstɒlɪk/ and pastor /pɑ:stə/. Moreover, “b” is silent in crumb /krʌm/ and numb /nʌm/ but it is retained in crumble /krʌmbəl/ and number /nʌmbə/; whereas “b” is silent in both plumb /plʌm/ and plumber /plʌmə/. And how do we justify the silent “t” in pestle /pesl/ which is not silent in pistle /pɪstl/ or the “w” which is silent in sword /sɔ:d/ but recoverable in swore /swɔ:/? Our investigation reveals that many Esan speakers of English use, among others, \*/læmb/ with emphasis on the “b” when saying “The Lamb of God”, \*/gnæf/ when saying “Sinners will gnash their teeth in hell”, and \*/lɪstɪn/ with emphasis on the letter “t” when saying “listen”, without any sense of guilt, whatsoever. In RP “b” is silent in lamb, “g” is silent in gnash and “t” is silent in listen.

The Esan speakers in our sample, however, have a field day with words like knife, knight, know, knowledge, knock, knee, knack. In other words, they do not pronounce the word-initial consonant “k” in the above-named words, just as it is in the RP. The inference that can be drawn from this is that the Esan speaker tends to pronounce properly the words he has been taught, and mispronounce the ones he does not know. Lado links this ignorance with “a vocabulary problem” stressing that the “the problem is not of mastering the sound system but simply a matter of not knowing how to pronounce the word” (19). Also, Jibril’s mantra of “poor teaching” (“Regional” 47); Mackey’s mantra of

“incomplete learning” (*Language* 111) and Stevens’ “poor teaching, poor learning or both” (28) appear to hold sway here.

**(c) Homophone-Induced Pronunciation**

Spelling pronunciation by the Esan speaker also manifests in homophones – words which have the same vowel quality but are spelt differently. Put differently, homophones are (pairs of) words which have the same pronunciation but different spelling (and meaning). The Esan speaker in our sample forges a distinction between each pair of the words such that the words become minimal pairs. Consider the following examples:

**(i) Received Pronunciation (RP)**

- |     |                        |   |            |
|-----|------------------------|---|------------|
| 1.  | Francis/Frances        | = | /frã:nsis/ |
| 2.  | fiance/fiancée         | = | /fiã:ŋsei/ |
| 3.  | principal/principle    | = | /prinsəpl/ |
| 4.  | flour/flower           | = | /flauə/    |
| 5.  | sweet/suit             | = | /swi:t/    |
| 6.  | soar/sore              | = | /sɔ:/      |
| 7.  | key/quay               | = | /ki:/      |
| 8.  | ewe/you                | = | /ju:/      |
| 9.  | base/bass              | = | /beɪs/     |
| 10. | draw/drawer (of table) | = | /drɔ:/     |

**(ii) Esan Speakers’ Pronunciation**

- |     |           |             |               |            |
|-----|-----------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| 1.  | Francis   | /fransɪs/   | Frances       | /franses/  |
| 2.  | finance   | /fiãns/     | fiancée /     | fianse/    |
| 3.  | principal | /prɪnsɪpəl/ | principle     | /prɪnsɪpɔ/ |
| 4.  | flour     | /flɔ:/      | flower        | /flawə/    |
| 5.  | sweet     | /swit/      | suit          | /sut/      |
| 6.  | soar      | /soa/       | sore          | /sɔ/       |
| 7.  | key       | /ki/        | quay          | /kwe/      |
| 8.  | ewe       | /ɛwe/       | you           | /ju/       |
| 9.  | base      | /beɪs/      | bass          | /bas/      |
| 10. | draw      | /drɔ/       | drawer (safe) | /drɔa/     |

#### (d) Dropping of Palatal Approximant

While the Esan speaker seems to be at home with the palatal approximant /j/ at word – initial position (e.g. yeast, yam, young, yellow), the approximant /j/ which is not a part of the spelling creates difficulty for the Esan speaker, Ugorji calls this approximant “complex consonant” (83). Consider the following examples from our sample:

|            | <b>RP</b>     | <b>Esan-English</b> |
|------------|---------------|---------------------|
| student    | /stju:dnt/    | /student/           |
| stupid     | /stju:pɪd/    | /stupid/            |
| tune       | /tju:n/       | /tun/               |
| kudo       | /kju:dəu/     | /kudo/              |
| fuel       | /fju:l/       | /fue/               |
| municipal  | /mju:nɪsɪpl/  | /munisipal/         |
| manipulate | /manɪpjuleɪt/ | /manipulet/         |
| tribunal   | /traɪbjʊ:nl/  | /trabuna/           |
| tribute    | /tribju:t/    | /tribut/            |
| assume     | /əsju:m/      | /azum/              |

Thus, the Esan speaker, like most other Nigerian speakers of English, ignores the ‘intrusive’ yod /j/ because he does not have it in his language (mother tongue). He simply carries over his L<sub>1</sub> habit to the L<sub>2</sub>. It is little wonder then that Sotiloye defines interference as “the carry-over of L<sub>1</sub> patterns into L<sub>2</sub> usage” (137). It appears the Esan speaker adopts the same “short-cuts” as the American English speaker. Trudgill and Hannah report that “student”, “tune” are transcribed (and pronounced) /studnt/ and /tun/ respectively in American English (41). This is a possible influence of American English on Esan, a subject, as mentioned earlier, though outside the purview of this study is a veritable area of investigation by language scholars. And as Anthony Kirk – Green observes, “The influence of American English in West Africa and its changing status may soon become a field of profitable research” (129).

#### (e) Haplology

Haplology, as used in phonology, “refers to the omission of some of the sounds, occurring in a sequence of similar articulations” (Crystal



224). The native speaker of English omits the sounds in his speech while the Esan speaker recovers them fully. Esan is syllable-timed, whereas English is stress isochronic. So the Esan speaker pronounces virtually all the syllables of the English word as if he were pronouncing in his mother tongue. Haplology is mainly represented by the schwa (/ə/), and sometimes without a schwa at all. Both categories of Esan speakers in our sample discount this notion of haplology.

Consider the following examples:

|               | <b>English (RP)</b> | <b>Esan English</b> |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Sat(ur)day    | /sætədeɪ/           | /satəde/            |
| prob(ab)ly    | /prɒbəbli/          | /probabli/          |
| lib(ra)ry     | /laɪbrɪ/            | /labrari/           |
| nep(o)tism    | /nepətɪzəm/         | /nepotism/          |
| ap(pa)ratus   | /æpreɪtəs/          | /aparatus/          |
| fav(ou)ritism | /feɪvrɪtɪzəm/       | /fevɔritizm/        |
| p(o)lice      | /plɪ:s/             | /polis/             |
| Brit(ai)n     | /brɪtn/             | /britten/           |
| Laz(a)rus     | /læzrəs/            | /Lazarəs/           |
| cat(a)logue   | /kætlɒɡ/            | /katalɒɡ/           |
| prosp(e)rous  | /prɒsprəs/          | /prosperəs/         |
| mosq(u)ito    | /mɒski:təu/         | /mɒskwito/          |
| amo(e)ba      | /əmi:bə/            | /amɔeba/            |
| lux(u)ry      | /lʌkʃrɪ/            | /lɔzuri/            |
| comf(or)table | /kʌmfətəbl/         | /kɔnfɔtebo/         |
| Deborah       | /debərə/            | /debora/            |
| ro(a)r        | /rɔ:/               | /roa/               |
| o(a)r         | /ɔ:/                | /oa/                |
| ho(a)rse      | /hɔ:s/              | /hoas/              |
| bo(a)r        | /bɔ:/               | /boa/               |
| fort(u)nate   | /fɔ:ʃnət/           | /fɔtuneti/          |
| co(lo)nel     | /kɜ:nəl/            | /kɔlɔnɛ/            |

Other examples of spelling pronunciation in Esan are as follows:

|         | <b>English RP</b> | <b>Esan English</b> |
|---------|-------------------|---------------------|
| soldier | /sɒdɪə/           | /səuldʒa/           |
| gaol    | /ɡəʊ/             | /dʒeɪl/             |

|           |            |            |
|-----------|------------|------------|
| president | /pɹɛsɪdnt/ | /prezɪdnt/ |
| Chicago   | /tʃɪkago/  | /ʃɪka:gəu/ |
| brochure  | /brɒtʃɔ/   | /brəʊʃə/   |
| build     | /biud/     | /bɪld/     |
| ewe       | /ɛwe/      | /ju:/      |
| visit     | /vɪsɪt/    | /vɪzɪt/    |
| Islam     | /ɪslam/    | /ɪzla:m/   |
| wolf      | /wɒf/      | /wʊlf/     |

### Comments

English spelling, no doubt, poses pitfalls for the unwary. Indeed, Clark, Yallop and Fletcher are right as they declare that English spelling is not a direct reflection of pronunciation (6). Yet, second language learners are being censured for using spelling pronunciation just as Bailey observes that cultivated speakers regard “most spelling pronunciations as a mark of the less than well-educated” (201). While illiteracy cannot be ruled out, native speakers of language involuntarily and sometimes voluntarily use differences of sound in order to show their linguistic affiliation. Sometimes also, people hold on to wrong choice because they don’t want to be a part of the new language and its trappings.

### Conclusion

We have distilled from the foregoing analyses that English does not have a spelling system that is deliberately designed to reflect pronunciation. And exposing a language learner to these rather disparate pronunciations is a precarious procedure at best. The confusion arising from this exposure gives vent to spelling pronunciation. Although our intention in this paper is not to make out a case for spelling pronunciation, yet spelling pronunciation is near inevitable to a language learner. Therefore, spelling reform – the spelling that has a direct bearing on pronunciation – is one antidote to spelling pronunciation.

That aside, the Esan speaker transfers his language structure to English. For example: the string “oa”, in our data, is known to him. It means “home” in Esan and it occurs in proper names as in *Oamen*, *Dare*, *Oahimije* (names of persons). So when he sees, *roar*, *oar*,

*hoarse, boar* in English, he simply pronounces them in line with their spellings, and in line with his linguistic repertoire: /roa/, /oa/, /hoas/ as against RP /rɔ:/, /ɔ:/, /hɔ:s/ and /bɔ:/ respectively. Proper teaching and proper learning therefore are the remaining remedies for spelling pronunciation in Esan.

In any case, spelling pronunciation in Esan remains part of the variety of English called Nigerian English, which is gaining currency by the day. Spelling pronunciation is not, and may not however be equated with pidgin.

### **Works Cited**

- Adetugbo, Abiodun. "Problems of Standardization and Nigerian English Phonology." *Nigerian English: Influences and Characteristics*. New ed. Ed. A.B.K. Dadzie and Segun Awonusi. Yaba: Sam Iroanusi, 2009.
- Awonusi, Victor Olusegun. "Some Characteristics of Nigerian English Phonology." *Nigerian English: Influences and Characteristics* new ed. A.B.K. Dadzie and Segun Awonusi. Yaba: Sam Iroanusi, 2009.
- Bailey, Charles – James N. *English Phonetic Transcription*. Dallas: SIL and U of Texas, 1985.
- Clark, John, Collin Yallop and Janet Fletcher. *An Introduction to Phonetics and Phonology*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford. Blackwell, 2007.
- Crystal, David. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Firth, J.C. *Tongues of Men and Speech*. London: Faber, 1964.
- Fronkin, Victoria, Robert Rodman and Nina Hyams. *Introduction to Language*. 8<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Boston: Thomson, 2007.
- Gondin, W.R. and Edward Mammen. *The Art of Speaking Made Simple*. London: Doubleday, 1967.
- Jibril, Munzali. "Diachrony and Socio-Linguistics in Nigerian English". Seminar Paper. University of Maiduguri, 1985.
- Jibril, Munzali. "Regional Variation in the Nigerian Spoken English" *Varieties and Functions of English in Nigeria*. Ed. Ebo Ubahakwe. Ibadan: African UP, 1979.

- Jowitt, David. *Nigerian English Usage: An Introduction*. Ikeja: Longman, 1991.
- Kirk-Green, Anthony. "The Influence of West African Languages on English." *The English Language in West Africa*. Ed. John Spencer. London: Longman, 1971.
- Lado, Robert. *Linguistics across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1957.
- Mackey, William F. *Language Teaching Analysis*. London: Longman, 1965.
- O'Connor, J.D. *Phonetics*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1973.
- Sotioloye, Bosede. "Sociolinguistics." *Introduction to Linguistics: Ilorin Text in Linguistics and Literature*. Ed. Ore Yusuf. U of Ilorin P, 1992.
- Stevens, Peter. "The Localised Forms of English." *The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures*. Ed. Braj B. Kachru. Oxford: Pergamon P, 1983.
- Ugorji, C.U.C. *Nigerian English Phonology*. Frankfurt: Deutsche, 2010.