

An Analysis of Grapho-phonological Infelicities in the Nigerian Political Discourse

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Abstract

When one fails to pronounce one's words acceptably, the listeners may not quickly and easily grasp the meaning or significance of what is said. Consequent upon so many factors including, most importantly, the grapho-phonological incompatibilities in English, many Nigerians do pronounce their words far from what is acceptable. This is because English, unlike many Nigerian languages, does not have letter-sound correspondence. So capricious are the orthographic representations of many English sounds that analogy is practically impossible. An attempt at analogizing brings about faulty articulation of the word thereby impairing or at least delaying intelligibility. In this paper, an attempt is made to analyse some of the grapho-phonological infelicities in the Nigerian political discourse. Using the speech act theory, it is discovered that many Nigerian speeches are infelicitous and the performances unhappy. A lot of deviations are noticed due to one reason or another among which is the unavailability of many of the sounds mispronounced in Nigerian indigenous languages. Besides, unaware of the morphophonemic realizations in word extension, faulty analogies are made. Finally, it is discovered that many Nigerians do mix up certain sounds or are completely ignorant of how such a word might be pronounced. However, the problems of grapho-phonological infelicities are not insurmountable. Mental alertness, good reading and speaking habits, conscious studies of such words that pose difficulties, listening to the native or near native speakers would go a long way to improve the standard of Nigerians users of English.

Introduction

All Nigerians directly or indirectly comment daily on the political situations in the country. This presupposes that both high and low,

leaders and followers, actors/players and spectators are political commentators. Organized programmes are put in place to actively discuss, comment on and perhaps pass judgement on happenings in the political arena.

Happenings are of varying degrees and diverse in nature. As a friend¹ observed sometime in 2003,

There is no week in this country when something new would not happen. The newspapers would always have something to say and people would always have reasons to converge and discuss.

The statement above is very correct because truly, Nigerians have always had one thing or the other to say as regards the polity whether national or regional.

Perhaps this informs the various Radio and TV² programmes specifically designed to bring together Nigerians of different ethnic and political bias, in a television studio or phone-in programme to state, explain, review, analyse, compare, contrast, reflect on, evaluate, inform the public, enlighten the populace, applaud, condemn, criticize and verbalize their views on the political developments in Nigeria. Among the hundreds of such programmes are: **Talk Nigeria, Rule of Law, Editors Forum, View Point, Political Trail, People's Parliament, National Pulse** and **Democratic License**. Apart from the anchor(s), the guest (s), at least more than ten thousand Nigerians³ are made to say one thing or another as viewed by them.

As a result of the dominant roles English play in the country today due to many factors⁴, these programmes are aired in English which many of us learnt in schools through our models (teachers) who themselves never had any contact with the native speakers of English; nor do their own teachers fared better. However, owing to different exposures – political, social, educational and travel experience, Nigerians pronounce the same word in so many ways. The native speakers of English (whether Americans or the British) agree on how such words are pronounced. A deviant pronunciation in a political discourse tends to derail the thought or delay the comprehension.

One major reason adduced to these disparities apart from factors mentioned earlier is the grapho-phonological inconsistencies of the English word. So capricious and unpredictable is the English phoneme behaviour that a letter of the alphabet may be pronounced in four, five, six, seven, even fourteen different ways. A speaker of English in a second language situation may therefore be at a crossroads if s/he had not been properly educated on the articulation of such words. This is just because there is a problem with English when it comes to relating sounds to letters, or vice versa. As noted by linguists and commented upon by Jowitt (1996):

- i.* One sound may be represented by various different letters;
- ii.* Several different sounds or phonemes may be represented by the same letter or group of letters; and
- iii.* One sound may be represented by a group of two letters (digraph), each of which by itself may represent the same sound or a different sound.

For Example:

/ e / may be realized by e, ea, ai, ay, ie, a, u, eo, as we have in

bed / bed /	friend / frend/	head / hed/	many / meni /
said / sed /	bury / beri /	says / sez /	leopard / lepa:d/

Or the letter ‘o’ which may give various sounds depending on the environment of occurrence:

/ ɒ / in not, shot /ʌ/ in love, son /ɔ:/ in born, corn /ɜ:/ in word, worm
 /ə/ in doctor, police /əʊ/ rose, bold /au / in now, cow /u:/ in do, lose
 / u / in bosom, woman

The experience above makes the spelling of English confusing and difficult for a second language user. The spelling problem contributes to the difficulty of pronouncing English words correctly.

This views however is not supported by an article “Why Learn English”⁵ which asserts that

English is not only the most useful language in the world. It is also one of the easiest languages to learn and to use.

According to the writer, one of the many reasons that qualify English for the accolade above is that English has SIMPLE ALPHABET (capitals mine for prominence). He says that it has no special symbols such as é or ä. Subtly, he condemns German, Polish and Russian that are difficult to type on our computer.

However sweet or simple the above may sound, we still affirm that the English spelling is difficult to learn as related to sound production. Jowitt (op.cit.) asserts that:

It is dangerous in English to use the spelling of a word as a completely reliable guide to its pronunciation.

Whereas Nigerian Languages are different: the way a word is spelt tells you exactly how it is to be pronounced. Hence analogy is possible in articulating many Nigerian languages.

The question we may want to ask is why is English like this? The reasons are known to specialists in the language especially when we considered the activities of the Norman scribe⁶. One sure thing is that at no time in history was someone or a group of people sat down to invent a spelling system for English. It just evolved by itself. Jowitt affirms that:

The relationship between sound and spelling is far from being completely regular – there are a lot of irregularities.

He concludes that:

English would be a lot simpler without these irregularities.

The irregularities therefore are the infelicitous communication resulting from the spelling – pronunciation incompatibilities. And while Adetugbo (1979) commenting on communicative competence advises that we should ‘be more concerned with acceptability especially of the spoken medium within OUR IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT (underlining mine; capitals mine) before we set the too-high standard of international acceptability, we want to say that

one, within our immediate environment, many are proficient in the use of the language and two, our comments and discussions are now available on the internet. There are expressions such as

- **To equally listen to this news bulletin, log on to www.radio.....**
- **You can also listen to this programme on our website www.radio....**
- **You can listen to this at any part of the world by logging on to www.radio....**

What then are we saying? Allow our ignorance and incapacities to obstruct the too many good feats of our radio and television programmes? No.

At this juncture we wish to state that this paper only pays attention to the verbal proficiency of the numerous contributors on our Radio/TV programmes. It is the explanations for the imbalance that necessitated our perusal of the grapheme involvement.

Theoretical Framework

Linguistic theories have always tried to explain how language works. Speech – act theory is one of the many linguistic theories. A speech act, it is said, should mean what it says. Speech – act theory was developed by the Oxford Philosopher, J.L. Austin in the 1930s and expounded in the series of William James lectures that Austin gave at Harvard University in 1955.

Our utterances, under speech-act theory can be happy or unhappy which is performative kind of utterance. The criterion for a happy or felicitous performative is that the circumstances in which it is uttered should be appropriate i.e. certain felicity conditions must obtain. If a performative is unhappy, or infelicitous, something has gone wrong in the connection between the utterance and the circumstance in which it is uttered.

According to J.L. Austin (1962: 14 – 15) cited by Malmkjær (1999:486), there are four main types of condition for the happy functioning of a performative:

- It must be a commonly accepted convention that the uttering of particular words by particular people in particular circumstances will produce a particular effect;
- All participants in this conventional procedure must carry out the procedure correctly and completely;
- If the convention is that the participant in the procedure must have certain thoughts, feelings and intentions, then the participants must in fact have those thoughts, feelings and intentions; and
- If the convention is that any participant in the procedure binds herself/himself to behave subsequently in a certain way, s/he must in fact behave subsequently in that way.

If then any of these criteria is unfulfilled, the performative will be unhappy or infelicitous in one of two ways depending on which of the criteria is not fulfilled. Such an act that is not achieved is called **misfires**.

Osisanwo (2003) explains that there are three main types of speech-act. These are **locutionary act**, **illocutionary act** and **perlocutionary act**. Explaining further, Osisanwo (ibid) in reference to Austin (op.cit) says that:

A locutionary act is the act of saying, producing meaningful sounds, words with certain references.

He goes further to identify three components of locutionary act – **Phonetic component** (i.e. *phonological*), **Phatic component** (i.e. *syntactic*) and **Rhetic component** (i.e. *meaningful, both sense and denotation*). Malmkjær (op. cit.) explains that to perform a locutionary act is to say something in what Austin (op. cit.) calls “the full normal sense”. It includes

- a. **The phonic act:** *uttering noises*. This is called Phones.
- b. **The phatic act:** *uttering noises as belonging to a certain vocabulary and conforming to certain grammar*. These noises seen from this perspective are called Phemes

- c. **The rhetic act:** *using these noises with a certain sense and reference.* The noises seen from this perspective are called Rhemes.

From the foregoing, it is understood that the acts of pronunciation and spelling could be felicitous or infelicitous depending on whether the act is performed appropriately and has the desired effect.

For instance, a writer who spells **bough** instead of **bow**; **beer** instead of **bear**; **boor** or **bone** instead of **boar** will make performative unhappy and infelicitous.

In like manner, a speaker who pronounces **leaf** in place of **leave**; **zeal** in place of **seal**; **vine** in place of **fine** and **serf** in place of **serve** cannot achieve a desired result and hence the act becomes infelicitous.

In conclusion, as equally observed by Odeyemi (1997), if you fail to pronounce your words acceptably, your listeners may not quickly and easily grasp the meaning or significance of what you say. He emphasizes that

Your intelligibility may be impaired by obtrusive regional pronunciations or dialects. They may produce ‘negative judgements’ – judgements which may seriously affect auditory perceptions of the speakers CREDIBILITY, EDUCATION, RELIABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND CAPABILITIES FOR LEADERSHIP. (Capitals are mine for prominence)

Correct pronunciation and appropriate spelling forms are necessary for effective communication.

DATA PRESENTATION & DATA ANALYSIS

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. FAVOUR <u>I</u> TE/feivəɹɪt/ | They make their FAVOUR <u>I</u> TE [feiv <u>ɔ</u> rɪt]*, [feiv <u>r</u> ɪt]* succeed them ... |
| 2. B <u>E</u> NEATH/bɪnɪ:θ / | B <u>E</u> NEATH[benet]*, [benit]* this is the grand design to ... |

3. **TRIBUNAL**/traɪbjʊ:nl/ The **TRIBUNAL** [tribunæ]*, [tribjunə]* sitting at Orka ...
4. **REALMS**/relmz/ Lies within the **REALMS** [rɪms]*, [ri:ms]* of half lie, half-truth...
5. **GROSS**/grəʊs/ It's a **GROSS** [grɒs]* violation of the rule of law...
6. **GLORY**/glɔ:ri/ Our victory is to the **GLORY**[gləuri]*, [glɔri]* of God
7. **FATAL**/feɪtəl/ The **FATAL** [fætæl]* result of rebelling against a godfather...
8. **RESPONSIBLE**/rɪspɒnsəbl/ This singular act of **RESPONSIBLE** [responsibl]* ...
9. **RESPECT**/rɪspekt/ Whatever the outcome, we will **RESPECT** [respet],* [respect]* the ...
10. **FINITE**/faɪnaɪt/ No decision in this matter is **FINITE** [fɪnɪt]*...
11. **CAPACITY**/kəpæsəti/ He has no **CAPACITY** [keɪpæsɪti]*, [kæpæsɪti]* to wield any ...
12. **CHIEFTANCY**/tʃi:ftənsɪ/ Adorned with numerous **CHIEFTANCY** [tʃɪftənsɪ]* titles...
13. **LEISURE** /leɪʒə / AmE /li:ʒə/ Scheming even in their **LEISURE** [leɪjə]*, [li:ʒə]*
14. **CASSETTE**/kæset/ Can we have the electoral officer's voice on the **CASSETTE** [kæset]*, [kæset]*?
15. **FOLLOW**/fɒləʊ/ ... is not a good example to **FOLLOW** [fəʊləʊ]*
16. **GOSPEL**/gɒspəl/ He preaches a **GOSPEL** [gəʊspəl]*, [gəʊspəl]* of violence
17. **ELECT**/ɪlekt/ The senator **ELECT**
18. **MEDICINE**/medɪsn/ The **MEDICINE** [medɪsn]* [medɪsən]* man should be arrested
19. **NASCENT**/næsnnt/ Nurturing our **NASCENT**[næsent]*, [næsent]* democracy...

20. **PALACE**/pæləs/ At the Molete **PALACE** [pæləs]*, [pæləs] of the ...
21. **GLADIATORS**/glædiətəz/ The political **GLADIATORS** [glædiətəs]* in their quest to
22. **RENOVATE**/renəvɪt/ They refuse to **RENOVATE** [reməuvɪt]*, [renəuvɪt]*, [rɪnəufɪt]* old structures
23. **RENEGE**/rɪnɪːg/, rɪneɪg/ They however **RENEGE** [renɪdʒ]*, [renedʒ] on their promises
24. **ELEVEN**/ɪlevn/ **ELEVEN** [elevn]* men of the deputy governor's entourage
25. **MACHINERY**/məʃiːnəri/ To combat the PDP rigging **MACHINERY** [mæʃmɪəri]*, [mæʃmæəri]*
26. **NIGERIA**/naɪdʒɪəriə/ **NIGERIA** [næɪdʒɪəriə]*, [naɪdʒerriə]* is not ripe for ...
27. **ELECTION**/ɪlekʃn/ May 24, 2007 **ELECTION** [elekʃn]* ...
28. **LAGOSIANS**/leɪɡɒsɪənz/ **LAGOSIANS** [læɡəʊʃɪənz]*, [læɡɒʃɪənz]* need to cooperate with the present..
29. **INEC** /ɪnek/ The **INEC** [amek]* official in charge of ..
30. **ELECTORAL**/ɪlektərəl/ Speaking on the **ELECTORAL** [elektəʊrəl]* reform ...
31. **POLITICAL**/pəlitɪkl/ A member of National **POLITICAL** [pəulɪtɪkəl]*, [pəlitɪkl]* reform ...
32. **PROBLEM**/prɒbləm/ Our **PROBLEM** [prəʊblem]* is not ...
33. **DEMOCRACY**/dɪmɒkrəsi/ Practicing presidential **DEMOCRACY** [deməukreɪsɪ]*, [dɪməukreɪsɪ]* ...
34. **ATTORNEY GENERAL**
/ətɜːnɪ dʒenrəl/ The **ATTORNEY**[æntəʊni]* general of Lagos State
35. **DEMONSTRATED**/demənstreɪtɪd/ President Ya'adua has **DEMONSTRATED** [demənstreɪtɪd]*, [dɪmənstreɪtɪd]* enough commitment..
36. **GOVERNMENT**/gʌvənmənt/ ...and the **GOVERNMENT** [ɡɒvnmənt]*, [ɡɒvænment]* has approved...

37. AVIATION/eɪvɪeɪʃn/ The Minister of AVIATION [ævɪeɪʃn]*, [æfɪeɪʃn]*
38. MIRACLE/mɪrəkl/ No MIRACLE [mɪrækɫ]*, [mɪreɪkl]* this time will make the judge ...
39. STORIES/stɔːrɪz/ Stay together as we give you top STORIES [stəʊrɪs]*, [stɔːrɪs]* in the bulletin.
40. GIVEN /gɪvɪn/ To see that justice is GIVEN [gɪvɪn] at all times
41. UMAR/uma:(r)/ President UMAR [uməʊru]*, [umæru]*
Musa Ya'adua

Everybody has a right to pronounce foreign names as he chooses – Winston Churchill (1874 – 1965).

Having presented the target word tokens (column1 nos. 1- 41) and analysed our data/ identified different deviations especially in the environment in which they occurred, we wish to state that the various articulations granted these phonemes by different political interlocutors were from both radio and Nigerian television stations. While we have left out the particular persons or media houses, the performance had not excluded reporters, presenters, commentators, anchormen and women, contributors phoning in nor the moderators. Our major concern is the peculiar pronunciation exhibited different from what obtains among the native speakers and precisely in the dictionaries – our guide.

Discussion

The precarious nature of the English spelling is largely responsible for the diverse pronunciation forms of Nigerians. While it is obvious that many are ignorant or not bothered about specific sound formation in certain phonological environments, many simply do analogise a process of pronunciation which is not possible or simply alien to the English language.

English words are learnt not only by rules but also by exceptions to the rules. Such, therefore, is the degree of complexities in the English

grapheme-phoneme incompatibilities that performances either go far from the expected or that intelligibility is delayed.

In the 41 – item presented, Nigerians’ deviant articulations are predicated on diverse perceptions or intuitions among which are:

- i. The unavailability of sound and sound-symbol in the indigenous languages;
- ii. The many realisations of an English sound via many letters of the alphabet;
- iii. Outright confusion of whether a sound is realized in this or that particular way;
- iv. Lack of knowledge of certain rules especially as related to past tense formation, plural markers and morphophonemic rules;
- v. The influence of the mother tongue on a Nigerian articulation of English sounds;
- vi. Difficulties encountered when a letter is not pronounced (silent) in certain environment;
- vii. Lack of agreement on how abbreviations-turned-word are pronounced; and
- viii. Certain sound symbols mispronunciation seems prevalent in Nigerian discourse.

The interplay of two or more factors above results in vacillation between one form of pronunciation and the other and it seems once the idea is passed, though delayed, no one frowns on an inappropriate verbal repertoire.

After all, people claim, English does not belong to Nigerians but imported to serve some purposes and it is learnt formally in schools.

Though some are heavier than some others, the analysis of the Nigerian phonological realisations of some English graphemes is diverse and could be summed up as follows:

S/N	Phoneme	Sound system	Datum
1.	i	/ai/	1, 3, 10
2.	e	/ɪ/	2, 8, 9, 17, 23, 24, 27, 30, 30
3.	ea	/e/	4
4.	o	/u/	5
5.	o	/ɔ:/	6. 39
6.	a	/ei/	7, 28, 37
7.	a	/ə/	11, 12, 14, 20, 25, 33, 38
8.	ei	/e/	13
9.	o	/ɒ/	15, 16, 32
10.	i	/ Ø / zero	18
11.	a	/æ/	19
12.	or	/ə/	21
13.	e	/e/	22
14.	e	/ɪə/	26
15.	o	/ ə/	31
16.	en	/n/	40
17.	ar	/a:/	41
18.	Others showing regional dialect, outright lack of knowledge and pronunciation that is right either way.		29, 34, 36

Although we blame the English spelling for the many diverse and erratic forms of pronunciations, many second language users are indifferent to what correct pronunciation is. They hide under the cloak of a language that is not indigenous.

For many of the disparities noted in our data, important fact is that foreigners, Nigerians in this case, have their areas of difficult acquisition of the English pronunciation. Put succinctly, many indigenous languages do not have correspondent sounds as obtained in English. All that is done is simply approximate and use a close substitute in the mother tongue. Consequently, /əu/, /ɔ:/, /ei/ in *gross*, *glory* and *fatal* are realized as /ɒ/, /ɒ/ and /æ/ because they are not available in the mother tongue –ref. 5, 6, 7 in our data.

Furthermore, many other vowel and consonant sounds pose problems to Nigerians or sections of the country. Examples of these are:

/æ/, /ɑ:/, /ʌ/, /ɔ:/, /ɜ:/ /ə/, /ei/, /əu/, /ɪə/, /eə/

The ready substitutes we have especially on the diphthongs are [ɪə] as we have in *here, beer, dear, near, fear* etc.

[ɪə] *cure., endure, brochure, pure*

[uə] *sure, poor, tour, ensure*

[eɪ] *vehicle, leisure*

Again, consonants

/v/, /z/, /ʃ/, /h/. /tʃ/ do not occur in Yoruba.

/θ/, /ð/ are unavailable in the MTs.

Conclusion

English is far from the ideal writing system, as anyone with spelling difficulties knows. In fact, English does not contain a single instance of a two-way, one-to-one correspondence-letter to sound and sound to letter.

Many Nigerian users of English have problems with their spoken English at all the levels of phonology, for various reasons. The phoneme inventory in most of Nigerian's indigenous languages differs in varying degree from that of English. As a result of this, many speakers substitute similar or close phonemes in their own languages for those of English which are absent in their languages and difficult for them to pronounce. Such speakers may approximate English vowels by making them sound like their own MT phonemes, without really substituting one for another.

Furthermore, they might totally omit the problematic English phoneme or pronounce it in a totally different, peculiar or strange manner. Whatever the case be, it is most important that one pronounces well because pronunciation is the biggest thing that people notice about one's English. One should study it even if he thinks he can already communicate in English. The quality of our education or learning is usually measured by listeners with the yardstick of our

spoken English. Even when a speech contains little fact but polished pronunciation, the speaker tends to command a great respect from the listeners.

Our final word is that more efforts should be concentrated on our primary and secondary education. Input, we know determines output. If efforts are concentrated on the school children, it is believed that these will infiltrate the society into a more acceptable form of pronunciation. After all, classroom language is said to be the best. The English language teaching-learning environment should be very conducive. A language laboratory fully equipped with all necessary facilities will promote and enhance language acquisition. The literate members of the society who are mainly involved in the political discourse should endeavour to learn to pronounce every English word used correctly. Since good regular dictionaries (not specifically pronouncing) are handy, they may learn to understand phonetic transcription – the system for writing the pronunciation of English words. Now that the computer is everywhere, English pronunciation software is equally available in the market. These will teach the pronunciation of the most frequently used English words with phonetic transcriptions and audio recordings. This, however, is not a suggestion to make everyone become a phonetician or a phonologist.

NOTES

1. Bajo, M. O. is a social critic, political commentator, a teacher and an advocate of “fair dealing” – a view he says is ‘live and let live’.
2. Today, there are hundreds of government and private – owned radio and television stations. We do not want to be seen as castigating any station or programme.
3. Both the politicians and the commentators are ‘concerned Nigerians’. These Radio and TV interlocutors are from different walks of life. It is hard to find three people, from the same profession contributing in a single programme.
4. English fills the gap. It performs all the functions that none of the indigenous languages could perform and specifically that of linguistic unity.

5. The article sees English as the easiest to learn when compared to other languages. It sees English as the language that opens many doors and one that the whole world has agreed to speak.
6. During the latter part of the Old English period, two different groups of non-English speakers invaded the country. Both groups were Scandinavian and become French – speaking. Both of their languages, Old Norse and Old French had a considerable influence on English. Barber (1999: 127)

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