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# Comparative Study of Word Stress Among Nigerian Literate Speakers of English in Northern Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT**

Nigeria is a multilingual nation where over five hundred and seventy languages have been attested, and these languages are not mutually intelligible. Most Nigerian languages are also tonal. Studies have shown that Nigerian English prosodies differ remarkable from the Standard. One of such differences is remarkably in the placement of stress by Nigerian English speakers. This difference could however be as a result of the fact that native speakers of English acquires stress placement on the English words naturally while the Nigerian speakers, as second language users, learn the rules of applying stress correctly on English words in the classroom setting. Scholars have also observed that the inability of most Nigerians in placing stress correctly on English words have brought about the spoken English of most Nigerians becoming unintelligible especially to native speakers of English. The study was designed on the bases of four objectives, to iidentify the variations in NE word stress compared to that of SBE, ddetermine the spread of variations in NE, find out the word stress placement patterns in NE and provide justification for the word stress pattern of NE speakers in Northern Nigeria. The researchers employed four research questions as follows what is the level of variations in NE word stress compared to that of SBE? Doees variations in word stress affect meaning and understanding of English Literature? Why is the variation in word stress pattern in Northern Nigeria? To what extent does Northern Nigerians take cognizance of word stress in pronunciation. Descriptive survey design was used, structured questionnaire and interview was used to collect data. The responses collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation, subsequently simple percentage was used to analyzed data obtained using interview. The result shows poor word stress patterns in Northern Nigerian English with 34.6 % scored compared to the Standard British English 65.4% respectively.

**Keywords:** Comparative, Word Stress, Literate Speakers, English, Northern Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the common features of Nigerian English (NE) that is easily distinguishable when compared to Standard British English (SBE) is the phonological variation exibited by the NE speakers through their pattern of word stress. It is however, a common knowledge that English language is not the mother tongue (MT) or the first language (L1) of most Nigerians. English language is a patrimony of colonialism and as such, it is used in Nigeria as a second language (L2) for administrative and educational purpose among others. It is also used sometimes as lingua franca among different indigenous groups.

English language usage in Nigerian has given rise to an autonomous variety probably referred to as Nigerian English. A language variety can be distinguished in four major ways namely: phonological, lexical/vocabulary, syntactic and graphological (Obafemi, 1994).

Word stress is a situation where considered amount of force is exerted on a syllable at the point of articulation (Roach, 2000 and Adeyanju, 2003). Faleye (2014) states that stress "denotes performance that is articulatory which gives relative prominence to syllables in words, phrases or utterances". Omachonu (2011) expands further that in word stress, "each word is characterized by the fact that one syllable is

singled out as a bearer of primary or main stress". Going by this explanation, it is common to notice variation in stress placement when the Nigerian English is compared to standard British English. Getting the stress placement right is crucial both for native speakers and second language users. This is because speakers of stressed language depend strongly on stress pattern of a word in order to identify words while a wrong use of stress can cause grammatical and semantic confusions in the oral discourse of second language users. Besides, word stress has become a linguistic signal for cultural identity of some speakers. Akande in Faleye (2014) remarks that by listening to the spoken English of a Nigerian, it is normally possible to predict the part of the country such a speaker came from.

Studies based on samples of one words by a number of notable scholars (Omachonu, 2011; Onoshe 2010; Jibril, 1986; Faleye, 2014) using optimality theory, constraint theory, metric phonology, interlanguage theory to compare SBE and NE, turned outcomes of patterns of word stress in NE which are often described as deviants, errors, differences, divergences, etc. Gut's (2002), argues that the prosody of the Nigerian English is responsible for its peculiar pronunciation. Faleye (2014) also suggests the "categorization stems from employment of linguistic and contrastive approaches using the British English (BE) notion of correctness in their assessment of NE word stress patterns"

Moving away from Received Pronunciation (RP) as a standard for measuring oral competence in Nigerian speakers, some scholars offer argument that are founded on socio-linguistic ecosystem. These arguments link variation in word stress not only to prosody but also to some social, historical, political or pedagogical factors.

Correct placement of primary stress in English words is very important for word and cultural identification, guidance of lexical and orthographic errors. More needs to be done to reconcile views aimed at predicting and providing justification why the stress patterns of NE in Northern Nigeria differs from that of SBE

**Problem statement**

In spite of the noticeable distinguishing features of the spoken English of Nigerian, little has been done in identifying and predicting word stress in NE in the area of this study. There is still much to be done in investigating the correlation between variability and social variables as they affect word stress placement among speakers of NE in Northern Nigeria. Given that many Nigerian universities are producing large numbers of graduates, a systematic enquiry using broad-based data ought to be conducted involving a number of many ethnic groups from various parts of Nigeria to identify word stress patterns in Nigeria English. Such a linguistic survey will require gathering data from all the states that make up the Northern parts of the country and covering a larger number of ethnic groups in the area of this study. This is the gap which this study intends to fill.

**Justification of the study**

By showing the phonological differences in word stress placement between the native speakers of English (SBE) and Nigerian uses of English (NE), in Northern Nigeria where the education sector has been suffering a sort of set-back in some of the states, due to the prevalence of the insurgency for more than a decade ago , it is hoped that the literate speakers of Nigerian English in the area of study can be sensitized to adequate and proper assignment of primary stress in English words so as to improve their spoken English. Though the prevalence of insecurity in the Northern states would probably serve as as an impediment to the successful execution of this research, the researcher will scale this identified hurdle by training research assistants resident in Jos to carry out the field work. It is also hoped that speakers of English in Nigeria will thus find the outcome of this research useful for better classroom teaching. The findings will equally help not only the students and the teachers of English but also all the speakers of English or a second language especially the Nigerian audience as the majority of speakers of English in Nigeria have this "common problem" of word stress placement, there would therefore be an improvement in their verbal communication. Moreover, it is hoped that this study is the right step taken towards formulating a phonological theory for word stress in Nigerian English.

**Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to examine how literate Nigerian English (NE) speakers in the Northern Nigeria assign primary stress in English words in comparison with the Standard British English (SBE) speakers who are native speakers of English. This is done with a view to achieve the following specific objectives: To

i. identify the variations in NE word stress compared to that of SBE
ii. determine the spread of variations in NE
iii. find out the word stress placement patterns in NE
iv. provide justification for the word stress pattern of NE speakers in Northern Nigeria.

**Research Questions**

1. What is the level of variations in NE word stress compared to that of SBE
2. Does variations in word stress affects meaning and understanding of English Literature?
3. Why is the variation in word stress pattern in Northern Nigeria
4. To what extent does Northern Nigerians take cognizance of word stress in pronunciation

## RESEARCH METHODS

**Area of Study and Research Design**

This is a descriptive research design aimed at comparing the word stress of Nigerian English and Standard British English in Northern Nigeria comprising Borno, Adamawa, Bauchi, Taraba, Yobe, Gombe, Benue, Nassarawa, Plateau, Kogi, Niger, Kebbi, Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa and Kaduna States. In this study, fifty-five (55) respondents were involved: fifty (50) undergraduate students of University of Jos at four-hundred level and five (5) native speakers of Standard British English working in Theological College of Northern Nigeria (T.C.N.N.) Jos. The University of Jos is a miniature form of Nigeria in terms of the plurality of ethnic groups based on her admission policy which welcomes students from other parts of Nigeria particularly from the Northern parts of Nigeria and even beyond . The students sample was "purposively" selected across various academic disciplines irrespective of sex and age to make the subjects of the study. The only homogenous feature among the subjects was their level of education. As fourth year undergraduates of the University, it is assumed that they have acquired considerable linguistic performance in spoken English and some level of cognitive competence in the stress patterns in English, which they might have been imparted to during their secondary• education. The purposive sampling used is linguistically very heterogeneous as it greatly mirrors the pluralistic nature of the country in terms of ethnicity.

**The Study Population**

The population comprises of 400 level undergraduate students of the University of Jos and 5 native speakers of English working in Theological College of Northern Nigeria (T.C.N.N.) Bukuru, Jos where many English native speakers teach students. Out of this population, fifty-five subjects made up of fifty Nigerian undergraduate students in the University of Jos at 400 levels and five native speakers of English were selected. The participants were chosen on the grounds of their education and linguistic history. All Nigerian speakers were born and were educated in Nigeria. They were drawn from all the states in Northern Nigeria and the major ethnic groups in the region. The researcher ensures that most of the Nigerian students had been taught English by teachers who are Nigerians.

Of the British English participants, four are males and one female. They all speak an approximation of Southern Standard British English and the least educated among them holds a university degree. A native British English speaker with a doctoral degree and who teaches English served as the control. The control was born and brought up in England. He speaks English as his first language and had his primary, secondary and university education in England. He did his post graduate studies in the United Kingdom, majoring in Linguistics. He was fifty years old and though he has lived and worked in Nigeria for many years, he has a clearly distinguishable British public school accent.

With regards to the educational status of the respondents, all the NE speakers that used were final year students of the University of Jos who had about two months to graduate. The least educational qualification of the native speakers of the SBE was first degree. A respondent had in addition a

Postgraduate Diploma in Education. Otherwise, other participants were doctorate degree holders. There is no doubt that educational status has some influence on the performance of the participants. Though it was noticed that the native speakers of SBE produced accurate English sound with ease, there are tendencies to suggest that the speakers benefitted from their years of studies using Standard British English.

Though it is true that the kind of English used in the Nigerian educational system is SBE, learners of English in Nigeria either fail to lose their native tongue accents or ended up picking that of their teachers. In either case, the product of their English will be Nigerian English.

**Instruments for Data Collection**

The researcher used both field and library research to gather relevant data for the study. Observation, a questionnaire, oral test and an interview were used as elicitation instruments in collecting data for the study. All were aimed at gathering information about the socio-linguistic background of the subjects and assessing their performance in assigning word stress in Nigerian English. The interview followed structured questions which were tape-recorded as the respondents answered them and also filled the questionnaire. The section of the test was a word-list of fifty selected English words for the students to pronounce one after the other. Of the 50 words, 24 are disyllabic, 23 are tri-syllabic, and 3 polysyllabic. Their pronunciations of these words were also tape-recorded by the researcher who was assisted by two research assistants selected from the undergraduate students in the university. As final year students in the University, it was easy for them to locate the officials and some members of all the state and ethnic based students' associations in the university to elicit relevant information from them in the company of the researcher. The word-list was selected from Kujore (1985) English Usage: Some Notable Nigerian Variations.

**Method of Data Collection, Analysis & Interpretation.**

Respondents were contacted one by one and were interviewed and made to fill a questionnaire to supply information about their socio-linguistic backgrounds. Each was also tested on the placement of primary stress in isolated English words by pronouncing each word as distinctly as possible while the voice was being tape - recorded. These fifty words as stated earlier were selected from Kujore (1985). Their recorded voices (answers) were later played back, listened to and evaluated using the recorded voice of the control, which is the same as the Received Pronunciation (RP) in terms of word stress placement in English words. Two research assistants — a male and a female, residents and students of the University of Jos were used to help the researchers gain easy access to the respondents. A five-man team of assessors comprised of the researchers, three post graduate students of English in the University of Jos and the control was constituted. They all listened attentively to the tape-recorded voice of each subject and assessed each one after the other. This is to ensure objectivity in the assessment of each subject. On each sheet were 8 English words pronounced by each subject with Nigerian English and Standard British English placement of primary or principal stress as compiled by Kujore. These words were also tested and confirmed to be correct by a teacher of English phonetics and phonology in College of Education beforehand. The result of the performance of each subject was recorded separately on the score sheet meant for it.

The second part was the administration of a test to assess the performance of each subject the placement of primary stress in English words. This was done to determine the pronounced word stress pattern of each subject: whether it is NE or SBE. The voice of each respondent was tape-recorded as he/she pronounced the fifty English words as distinctly as possible in a relaxed mood. These recorded responses were later on listened to attentively and carefully transcribed in order to determine the syllable upon which the principal stress fell in each word. The marking scheme prepared for this purpose was also adopted from Kujore's translation of NE word stress placement alongside with the SBE equivalent of each word since the work remains valid in respect of the assignment of stress to NE and SBE. The response of all the fifty Nigerian university students and the five graduate native-speakers of English being tape-recorded were later on replayed for in-depth analysis and interpretation.

After a metrical phonological analysis of word stress variants of respondents, descriptive statistics specifically, percentage score was used to quantify the performance. After a metrical phonological analysis of word stress variants of respondents, descriptive statistics specifically, percentage score was

used to quantify the performance of the subjects. The correctness or otherwise of the analysis was collaborated with assessment done using a prepared simple marking scheme on the conformity of the word stress placement to Standard British English (RP). Following this, a percentage score of subject performance based on their geographical location was also computed.

Following the computations of word stress variants, two kinds of outcomes - "correct word stress placement" and "incorrect word stress placement" were obtained. All incorrect placements will be interpreted as variants of SBE. The patterns of these variants will be analysed further in order to compare how word stress patterns of the NE respondents differs from that of SBE, taking into account other interlanguage factors.

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

**Research Question 1:** What is the level of variations in NE word stress compared to that of SBE

| S/N | Statement Strategy | Mean | SD | Remark |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Many word are pronounced wrongly eg IMport | 3.56 | 1.87 | Accept |
| 2. | Word stress variation is more common in the North-eastern State of Nigeria | 3.78 | 1.99 | Accept |
| 3. | The high level of variations affects literature | 3.67 | 1.89 | Accept |
| | **GRAND MEAN** | **3.67** | | **Accept** |

***Source: Field Survey 2022***

The table above discuses the level of variations in the word stress patterns in the study area. The result shows that there is high variations in the word stress pattern in the study area with a mean of 3.67 the respondent agree that many words are pronounced wrongly across the study area.

**Research Question 2:** Does variations in word stress affects meaning and understanding of English Literature?

| S/N | Statement Strategy | Mean | SD | Remark |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | When the word stress is wrongly pronounced the word losses it meaning | 3.88 | 1.86 | Accept |
| 2. | Too many wrong pronunciation affects understanding of the statement | 3.56 | 1.87 | Accept |
| 3. | Good word stress pronunciation attracts students attention | 3.88 | 1.86 | Accept |
| | **GRAND MEAN** | **3.77** | | **Accept** |

***Source: Field work 2022***

The table above discuses the impact of word stress pattern on meaning and understanding of words. The research questions state as does variations in word stress affect meaning and understanding of English Literature? Word stress is so important in English as it can either change the meaning of the word or lead to misunderstanding of the word. The respondent agree with the statement that poor pronunciation of words without taking into cognizance of word stress can make the word sound like a pigging English or a vernacular. The respondent agree with a grand mean of 3.77 respectively.

**Research Question 3:** Why the variation in word stress pattern in Northern Nigeria

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Mother tongue is the main factor | 3.56 | 1.87 | Accept |
| 2. | Absence of some consonant sound in Local Languages eg V in Hausa Language | 3.56 | 1.76 | Accept |
| 3. | Interference of Portugal Missionaries | 3.67 | 1.89 | Accept |
| | **GRAND MEAN** | **3.67** | | **Accept** |

***Source: Field work 2022***

The table above questions the variation in word stress pattern among people in Northern Nigeria. The research question state as why the variation in word stress pattern in Northern Nigeria The research identify four major factor responsible for the poor pronunciation among people in the Northern states, this include mother tongue, absence of some consonant sounds in some local languages such as V in Hausa Language. This factors were where agreed by the respondent as responsible for poor stress pattern in Northern Nigeria.

**Research Question 4:** To what extent does Northern Nigerians take cognizance of word stress in pronunciation

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1.** | Import | 85 | 15 | Poor |
| **2.** | Communication | 76 | 24 | Poor |
| **3.** | Authority | 65 | 35 | Fair |
| **4.** | Animation | 87 | 13 | Poor |
| **5.** | Systematic | 56 | 44 | Good |
| **6.** | Red | 34 | 66 | Very Good |
| **7.** | Total | 34 | 66 | Very Good |
| **8.** | Orientation | 86 | 14 | Poor |
| | **Grand Percentage** | | **34.6%** | **Generally Poor** |

***Source: Interview 2023***

The table above discusses the extent of good or poor usage of word stress pattern in Northern Nigeria. The question stated as, to what extent does Northern Nigerians take cognizance of word stress in pronunciation. As demonstrated above only 34.6% of the respondent were able to pronounce the words correctly taking into cognizance the stress pattern involved in each case.

## CONCLUSION

Correct stress pattern has been observed to be more important for intelligibility than correct pronunciation of segments in English. In fact, stress gives overall shape to the word. Therefore, if easy intelligibility is to be achieved, it is important to give words their correct accentual pattern and rhythm. The effect of stress both at the segmental and lexical levels is to show the importance of stress. This is not only for what it contributes to the correct pronunciation of English at the segmental and suprasegmental levels, but also, for its effect on international intelligibility, since stress performs both lexical and symbolic functions. It would however be observed in this study that it is not easy for the NE speaker to pronounce English words correctly like the SBE speaker. This kind of assertion neglects the obvious fact that NE speakers have no problem of being understood by their Nigerian counterparts unless there is a serious grammatical failure. This only problem "intelligibility -wise, comes whenever the NE speaker happens to communicate verbally with a native speaker who is not familiar with the linguistic terrain of Northern Nigeria. However, this is not "irredeemable", since many Nigerians with the right training and exposure have shown that near native-like accent is attainable. In fact, some national newscasters in Nigeria have been shown to possess near native-like intonation patterns.

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