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'Women should not wear pants?' Reflections from Kenyan English speakers in a strait between American and British English

Author
Vicky Khasandi-Telewa
Email: vkhasandi@laikipia.ac.ke

Laikipia University, Kenya.

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Abstract
This paper aimed at examining the lived experiences of Kenyans caught between the two main varieties of English and the communication challenges they often face. The paper aims to provide evidence for the challenges that Kenyan speakers of English have experienced as a result of the confluence between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). The study is explorative; thus, a descriptive research design was used. The purposive sample consisted of sixty-five subjects, all of whom were well-travelled. Using interviews, they were asked about their experiences with the different varieties of English, and their responses were recorded. Autoethnography, a qualitative research method that involves introspection and cultural analysis, was also used. Thematic content analysis was used to extract the themes and group them for data analysis. The theoretical framework used is World Englishes. The results indicate that there is indeed some communication breakdown due to linguistic varieties, but the differences are largely understood by speakers of the different varieties. Attitude plays a major role in communication challenges between different English, especially among teachers. The study urges acceptance of different varieties of English so long as communication takes place. This has implications for teaching English to Kenyan and speakers of other languages to whom English is taught as a Second Language or Foreign language.

Key terms: American English, British English, Englishes, Kenyan English, TeSOL.

INTRODUCTION

Is there a 'Kenyan' English?

Kenya is an 'Anglophone' country, as it was colonised by the British and adopted their language as the sole official language from independence in 1963. In the Constitution of Kenya 2010, Swahili was made co-official with English, but English is still dominantly used in government functions and documents, such as parliament, media, courts and education. This paper examines the experiences of Kenyans caught between the two main varieties of English and the challenges they often face. It is based on lived experiences of Kenyans in the country and those who have travelled internationally, especially those living in the USA. Even though the English-educated Kenyans speak is not Standard British English (BrE), a lot of it is drawn from it in the form of spellings, grammar vocabulary, and pragmatics. There is, undeniably, a variety of Kenyan English (KenE) that has developed and has been described and discussed by several scholars (Atichi, 2004; Buregeya, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2019; Schmied, 1991a, 1991b, 2006; Itumo et al., 2017, 2018). Since English is the medium of instruction from the fourth year of the primary school course in Kenya, it would not be unreasonable to argue that with a primary school level of education, Kenyans speak a recognisable variety of English.

Buregeya (2019) estimates that 40 per cent of Kenyans speak KenE. As is common with natural language, sociolinguistic factors have led to sub-varieties existing within the English spoken in Kenya. The mainly affluent Kenyans speak a 'near native' variety, and the middle-class ones an acrolectal variety. Many rural folks and the poorer urban population speak a mesolectal variety with unique features that are clearly ungrammatical such as 'My names are XYZ'. Our focus is on the acrolectal variety that is spoken by a majority of Black, indigenous Kenyans who have undergone education being taught by teachers whom themselves speak this variety and even scored good grades in the local examinations. While the education system uses what is considered Standard BrE, the same Kenyans are inundated with AmE influence from media, fashion and other cultural pressures. Television, movies, and games, for instance, bring a great influence from AmE, and since many youths spend a lot of time in entertainment dominated by AmE, Kenyans sometimes find themselves caught between the two varieties.

While living in Kenya, the choice of variety is really just a matter of preference, but when they come face-to-face with AmE requirements, they face some difficulties. This paper thus sets out to describe some of the challenges they encounter due to these differences. It is based on the real-life experiences of the author, her friends and interviewees. Thus auto ethnography (Campbell, 2016) is used to back up the interviews that were carried out on lived experiences of the interviewees and their families and friends. Kenya's language in education policy requires that learners use English as a medium of education from grade four except for other language subjects such as Kiswahili, German and French. Thus English in Kenya is taught as ESL (English as a Second Language), which requires quite a high level of proficiency.

Kenya is a former British colony, so the English used in Kenya is largely from the Standard British English variety. Since The USA is a superpower and has led the world in technological advancement and cultural development, AmE is also influencing a lot of lives around the world, Kenya included. For the older generations that experienced colonialism or were taught by educators from the colonialism generation, there's no doubt that BrE is favoured over AmE. However, many of the younger generations of children often find themselves caught up between BrE and AmE usages.

They are those that believe that the variety of English does not cause confusion since American and British English speakers are aware of their differences, read each other's books and make jokes about their varieties. However, for Kenyans and I believe other ESL and EFL speakers, these dissimilarities can be a cause of real consternation and can even be costly. This is because both versions of the language have different grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and cultural references. Especially in education, learners have found themselves scoring low grades due to these disparities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is now generally accepted that English has evolved in such a way that there are such distinct regional and national varieties that, indeed, these can be regarded not as English' but, in fact, 'Englishes' (Kachru, 1992; Mollin & Sridhar, 2019; Jenkins, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2019; Seargeant, 2017; Liu & Zhang, 2018). Especially in former British colonies where English is taught as a Second Language, local flavours have emerged, such as Nigerian English, Ghanaian English, Indian English and, indeed, Kenyan English. Itumo et al. (2018) point out Kenya has three main varieties of English: the variety spoken by white Kenyans (WhKE), the acrolectal Kenyan English spoken by the Black Indigenous Kenyans (BIKE), and the mesolectal varieties, which are ethnically marked (Kioko & Muthwii, 2004; Hoffmann, 2011; Njoroge, 2011). Following recommendations to describe the acrolectal variety of English, Itumbi et al. (2018) show that KenE has six diphthongs: / ai/, /oi/, /ua/, /ia/, /ea/, /ua/ and /au/, which are acoustically different from the eight RP diphthongs.

Buregeya (2001:1) looked at the grammatical (i.e. syntactic and morphological) features of 'Kenyan English, using the Second Language Acquisition framework' to account for the variability which characterises their use. He concluded that it was only natural to develop variations in the use of a target language that is so widely used, such as English in Kenya which is taught as a Second Language due to imperfect learning of the target language. This contributes a lot to our study, only that we use a different theoretical framework since 'World Englishes' has already been widely discussed as a framework.

Schmied (1991b) discusses the variation in phonology between KenE and Standard BrE, which teachers believe they are teaching to students. He argues that attitude plays a big role in the continued use of these differences. Even those who know that they are clearly violating standard RP pronunciation do not seem to mind this so long as they are understood by their interlocutors. In fact, many feel like striving to use the 'correct' BrE vowels makes them sound snobbish. In fact, he avers the vernacular forms have covert prestige. They seem to function as a symbol of group identity, which is used to signal national solidarity even by those who have, through study and travel, clear links with Standard English speakers but who do not necessarily want to be associated with them in the national context. These salient and consistent features are clear markers of the developing national variety of KenE (or EastAfrE). Schmied (1991b:424-425)

Itumo et al. (2017: 3) used an acoustic-based approach to study the phonology of Kenyan English, unlike most of the previous research, which has mainly studied it using perception-based approaches such as Schmied (2006) and Njoroge (2011). Following on, Itumo et al. (2018) demonstrated acoustically how KenE uses six diphthongs: /ai/, /ɔi/, /ua/, /ia/ and /au/. These are contrasted with the eight RP diphthongs, /ɑɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /eɪ/, /ʊə/, / ɪə/, /eə/, /əʊ/ and /ɑʊ/. Furthermore, 'The FACE and GOAT vowels were observed to monophthongise from RP's /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ into /e/ and /ɔ/, respectively' (Itumo et al., 2018: 1). The same applies to KenE consonants as Itumo et al. (2018) found out that, unlike GB, typically KenE does not aspirate voiceless plosives where they are expected to be aspirated, i.e. in initial stressed syllables, while it *fully* voices their voiced counterparts (Itumo et al., 2018:1).

Buregeya (2004) discusses pragmatic diversity by explaining how politeness is not expressed in the same way in KenE as in BrE. Kenyan English tends to rely mainly on imperative structures of three forms: the mere imperative, the imperative mitigated by 'please', and the imperative mitigated by 'kindly'. The explicit use of the verb 'request' seems to be also another preferred choice (p120). He concludes that what is considered polite in KenE is used to give orders, instructions and advice in BrE but is not considered polite. Thus politeness is culturally determined.

These studies demonstrate that KenE has its own unique features, though it aligns more towards BrE. These variations are more distinct with AmE, which, though, is somehow more simplified in comparison to BrE. Webster tried to simplify spellings and pronunciations to make them more phonetic, so some

younger Kenyans prefer AmE as it has fewer complications than BrE, such as spelling with a double letter (for instance, counsellor versus counsellor; junior versus juniour). This paper explores how such disparities tend to interfere with communication.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section discusses issues that were found in the confluence of KenE with BrE and AmE based on lived experiences of the author and her interviewees. We shall discuss the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical, pragmatic and socio-cultural challenges encountered. Needless to say, these are but some of the numerous challenges experienced, but they do give a general overview that things are not always rosy, and there can be some real communication breakdown due to these varieties of English.

Pronunciation

There are often subtle differences in pronunciation between British and American English, which can cause difficulties for Kenyan speakers speaking the either dialect. Kenyan speakers may mix elements of both British and American English, leading to confusion for native speakers of either version of the language. British and American English have different pronunciation standards, and Kenyan speakers may find it difficult to choose between the two, leading to speech that is considered incorrect or substandard. Furthermore, the pronunciation of Kenyan English has been influenced by the local African languages and the various dialects of English that are spoken in Kenya. As a result, the accent and pronunciation can vary greatly depending on the speaker's background and education. Most pronounce the word as they spell it.
For example, House is /Haus/
Talk is /tok/

Thus, Kenyan English has its own unique pronunciation. Many university students have challenges when pronouncing words during Phonetics classes, one of the reasons being that some major reference books are American, such as Fromkin et al. (2019[1974]) versus Roach (2009) (BrE). For a student learning how to pronounce words correctly, the divergent pronunciations cause quite some challenge, and since many lecturers are from the BrE School, the Americanisms are marked as wrong. Some challenges for Kenyan English speakers in pronunciation include the following:

Vowel sounds in British and American English tend to differ, leading to distinct differences in pronunciation. For example, the word "bath" is pronounced with a long "a" sound in British English and with a short "æ" sound in American English. Also, the short "i" sound in 'bit' and "fit" may be pronounced as a long "ee" sound, as in 'beet, feet".

Since English is commonly spoken as a second language in Kenya, Kenyans tend to follow the Swahili five-vowel system rather than the twenty-vowel system of BrE or AmE. The five-vowel system mainly consists of /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/ and some of these vowels are never diphthongised as some English vowel sounds can be. An example of this can be seen between the words hat, hut, heart and hurt. In Kenyan English, these words all sound very similar due to substituting all of them with the same vowel sound /a/.
Beef- /bif/ instead of [bi:f]
Heed- /hid/ instead of /hi:d/

The consonant sounds in Kenyan English can also be different from those in British and American English. For example, the "th" sound in "think" may be pronounced as a "t" or "d" sound in AmE. The trill or retroflex "r" sound is particularly problematic since some dialects in BrE pronounce the rhotic 'r' while some don't, and the same to AmE. In British English, the letter "r" is usually pronounced, even at the end of words, while in American English, it is often silent. For example, the word "car" is pronounced with the /r/ sound, /ka:r/ in some dialects of American English and without the /r/ phoneme, /ka:/in most of BrE. Similarly, the /t/ sound in the middle of words is often pronounced differently in British and American English. In British English, the voiceless alveolar stop/t/ sound is usually pronounced as a glottal stop, while in American English, it is pronounced as a flap and can sound like 'bara'. The consonant sound in the initial syllable in "schedule" may be pronounced more like the consonant sound in "shed-tool" in Kenyan English instead of the pronunciation in American English.

During a presentation in a university seminar, the presenter was an agronomy lecturer discussing a certain type of natural fertiliser. He gave his presentation and completed it after twenty minutes. Then he asked his audience to ask any questions. The first hand that went up was an American scholar puzzled by what the fellow had been talking about all this time: 'Excuse me sir, what are bad droppings?' On learning what was meant, he said, 'Oh [b3:rd], [b3:rd]!' He appeared to be the only one lost since the other Kenyans understood well that many of our languages only use five vowels [i, e, a, o, u] which we transfer to English: all the fine distinctions in the other vowels of English are lost, but we don't fail to communicate because of this understanding. We just examine the context and get it.

Therefore the Kenyan student studying phonetics has to be careful to avoid the AmE pronunciation or else get failed in the examination. Non-standard pronunciation of English words due to the interference of local Kenyan languages is popularly known in the country as "breaking English" or "shrubbing". As mentioned above, many vowel and consonant sounds are pronounced with a Kenyan flavour which disregards the standard pronunciations. Schmied (1991b) actually points out that it could be deliberate and even prestigious to avoid the 'correct' pronunciation since one may appear snobbish to colleagues if one is too pedantic about 'correct' pronunciations. As a colleague pointed out, it is common even in Swahili to say 'nipe mandanzi moja' (give one doughnut [pluralised, instead of ndazi, which is singular]) (Francis Aswani, personal communication, 2017). Though this may irk Swahili purists, the reality is that communication has taken place. In writing out an exam, the correct grammatical construction will be used, but in casual conversation, it is ignored.

The melody and stress patterns of speech, or intonation, can also differ between British and American English. The stress on certain words and the tone of voice used to express emphasis may be different in Kenyan English too. For example, the stress pattern in questions can differ, with the stress often placed on different syllables in each dialect. The stress patterns in Kenyan English words can also be different from those in British and American English. For example, the word "record" may be pronounced with stress on the first syllable. In BrE, the general pattern is that the stress falls on the first syllable for nouns [**re**cord, **ex**port] and on the second syllable for verbs [re**co**rd, ex**po**rt]. For example, the stress on the word "photograph" may be on the first syllable in Kenyan English instead of the second syllable in British English. A professor explained how he had a problem pronouncing the word 'communicate', whereby he had problems placing the stress on the second syllable as expected from his lecturer. He got frustrated since in KenE; people just say 'communicate' with no stress on any syllable and are understood perfectly based on the context.

These differences in pronunciation can sometimes make it challenging for Kenyan speakers of English to communicate with native speakers of British or American English, as they may use a pronunciation that is not commonly understood outside of Kenya. Kenyan English has a unique accent and pronunciation that has been influenced by the local African languages and the various dialects of English that are spoken in Kenya. Kenyans also tend to pronounce all syllables and have challenges with silent syllables: 'Laboratory' is pronounced with all syllables, as is Greenwich, Woolwich, and sword, where the 'w' is fully pronounced, whereas it should be silent in BrE.

Vocabulary Differences

There are significant vocabulary differences between British and American English, and Kenyan speakers may struggle to choose the correct word to use in a given context. Different words or expressions are often used in British and American English, which can lead to misunderstandings. There are often different words used to refer to the same thing in British and American English. In British English, "biscuit" refers to a sweet baked good, while in American English "cookie" is used for the same thing. In British English, the storage compartment of a car is referred to as a "boot," while in American English, it is called a "trunk." In British English, a rented living space is referred to as a "flat," while in American English, it is called an "apartment." In British English, a machine used to move people or things vertically is referred to

as a "lift," while in American English, it is called an "elevator." In British English, "trousers" refer to an item of clothing worn on the lower half of the body, while in American English "pants" is used for the same thing. In British English, a portable handheld light is referred to as a "torch," while in American English, it is called a "flashlight." Football to a BrE speaker is soccer to an AmE speaker. There is a risk of a date failing because while a lady speaking BrE is waiting on the Second floor, her date has been patiently waiting on the first floor, which ideally is both correct. The first floor in AmE is actually the ground floor in BrE.

The researcher visited a friend of hers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Congo who now lives in Scotland. Since DRC was not colonised by the British, they learn English as a foreign language, and it is in the expanding circle of Kachru's World Englishes. In many cases, the Foreign Language English taught in the expanding circle is AmE. She bought some goodies for her children on the way to visit with her (AmE)/visit her (BrE). After she had unpacked her luggage, she came and said 'Thanks for the chips'. Since the visitor had not studied varieties of English, she was truly surprised as she could not remember buying any chips. It was only later that she learnt that what is called 'chips' in the BrE-originated KenE is in fact, referred to as french fries, and what is called 'crisps' is in fact 'chips' in AmE.

To further demonstrate this confusion, a restaurant had on its menu an item called 'chips' and another one called 'french-fries'. So some friends decided to make fun by ordering chips and other French-fries. The waiter was indeed bewildered as he was required to serve the same food under different labels on the menu. When writing her PhD thesis, there was genuine puzzlement from her BrE supervisor when the researcher talked about 'public' schools in Kenya being in dire need of facilities and equipment. In Britain, the public school is the very opposite of the public school in Kenya and, in fact, is equivalent to what is called the private school in Kenya and is for the middle class [working class in KenE].

But that is nothing in comparison to the situation with pants. A renowned American evangelist and prophet who is a stickler to the Bible preached Deuteronomy 22:5: 'A woman shall not wear a garment that belongs to a man, neither shall a man wear a woman's garment'. Being a fundamental Bible believer, he preached around the world and interpreted a *man's garment* to mean 'pants' so women were not to wear pants. In Kenya, where KenE has British foundations, fervent preachers took up the message and forbade women from wearing pants (knickers). Of course, what the prophet meant was that women should wear dresses and skirts and men's trousers. But due to the AmE confusion, it is still held as doctrine in some rural areas that women in that church do not wear pants. The researcher visited once, and as she was looking for the church's location, she was asked 'The one where women do not wear pants?' Needless to say, she was confounded and flabbergasted, but ostensibly that was the identifier of that church.

Kenyan English also has a rich vocabulary that includes many loanwords from local African languages, as well as words and expressions borrowed from Indian, British, and American English. These features of Kenyan English can make it a unique and versatile dialect that is well-suited to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Kenya. However, they can also make it challenging for Kenyan speakers of English to communicate with inner circle speakers of British or American English, as they may use vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar that is not commonly understood outside of Kenya. For example, "I shall go home now." Americans know what shall mean but rarely use it in conversation. It seems very formal. Americans would probably use "I will go home now." Whereas it is common to hear a BrE speaker, say, "Shall we go now?" The American would probably say, "Should we go now?"

Cultural References

Cultural references can also pose challenges, as idioms, sayings, and jokes that are common in British or American culture may not be understood by Kenyan speakers who are exposed to a different version of the language. This can make it difficult for Kenyan speakers to understand or participate in conversations in either dialect. For example, British humour tends to be more subtle and understated, while American

humour can be more direct and boisterous. Similarly, the concept of politeness can also differ between British and American cultures. For example, in British culture, politeness is often considered an important aspect of communication, while in American culture, a more direct and straightforward approach is often preferred. Many Swahili words have been adopted into Kenyan English, such as "jambo" (hello), "karibu" (welcome), and "jembe" (hoe). Kenyan English has its own names for local foods, such as "ugali" (a staple food made from maise flour), "nyama choma" (barbecued meat), and "mandazi" (a type of fried dough). Kenyan English has its own names for local transport, such as "bodaboda" (a type of bicycle taxi) and "matatu" (a type of minibus).

Grammatical Differences

There are also grammatical differences between British and American English, which can result in confusion for Kenyan speakers when writing or speaking. These differences can lead to misunderstandings or mistakes when speaking or writing in either dialect. Within each dialect, there are regional variations, which can further confuse Kenyan speakers who are trying to learn either British or American English. A strict BrE teacher will not easily accept 'this task is doable.' The researcher's English teacher in form one could not accept spellings such as 'program' or the use of 'gotten'. Further, there are a good number of spelling differences between British and American English. Noah Webster tried to reform and simplify English to make the pronunciation more phonetic. The inconsistencies in English spelling were frustrating to him, and the reform was also to emphasise the freedom of the

American from British domination during the era of fighting for their independence. Thus Webster proposed reforms such as colour from colour, a meter from metre, and criticise from criticise. One of the respondents in this research said that 'our children are almost sent to special education classes because of using BrE in America'. The American teachers think these Kenyan children now living in the USA are mentally retarded and do not understand 'English'.

British English speakers may use the present perfect to describe an action that started in the past and continues to the present, while American English speakers may use the simple past for this purpose. Some uncountable nouns such as "data", "equipment", "money", "property" and "software" are also often pluralised in Kenyan English, but this is especially prevalent in the rural areas and among the lower and lower-middle classes. Both AmE and BrE would frown at these:

'There's a lot of equipment being sold at the shop'.

The millionaire owns a lot of properties across the country.

She has downloaded different software to her laptop computer.

The way that collective nouns are treated in sentence structure can also differ between British and American English. For example, in American English, a collective noun is often treated as singular, while in British English, it is often treated as plural. Some AmE speakers would say, 'the team are ready to play,' whereas the BrE would say, 'the team is ready'. When doing TOEFL and other university entry examinations, Kenyan English speakers often get AmE wrong on such minor variations and can easily miss placement in an American university because of failing to make the required grade.

Also, the order of adjectives in a sentence can also differ between British and American English. For example, in British English, the order of adjectives is often "opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose", while in American English, the order may be "opinion-size-age-colour-origin-material-shape-purpose". Similarly, the past tense can also be used differently in British and American English. For example, British English speakers may use the simple past for an action that was completed in the past, while American English speakers may use the present perfect for this purpose. The plural forms of words can also be different in Kenyan English. For example, the word "matatu" (minibus taxi) is often pluralised as "matatus". In the past participle form, Americans tend to use the –en ending for some irregular verbs. For example, an American might say, "I have never gotten caught," whereas a Brit would say, "I have never got

caught." Americans use both got and gotten in the past participle. Brits only use got.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kenyan speakers of English face challenges when choosing between British and American English due to differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and cultural references. Difficulties stem from the different ways British and American English are used and the need to code-switch between the two to meet the demands of different social and cultural contexts. To overcome these challenges, it is important for them to become proficient in one version of the language and to familiarise themselves with the cultural references associated with that version. For educators, it is important not to fail a student for dialectal differences between BrE and AmE. In fact, in the world of academia, many refereed journals ask one to choose either BrE or AmE but to be consistent with the choice. However, some teachers, lecturers and journal editors are insistent on a particular version and may reject an otherwise good piece of writing just because it uses the 'wrong' version of English. Tolerance is urged, and there is a need to accommodate the various Englishes, which go beyond the three discussed here and focus on ensuring communication. Attitude is what causes one to look down upon a user of another version as 'wrong', but this should be discouraged.

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