THE IDIOSYNCRASY OF EAST AFRICAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

World Englishes is a topic of great significance since the English language is spoken by many populations around the world as a developed language that may be secondary to a native tongue. Given the spread of English worldwide, it seems that any discriminative views against speakers of English whose grammar, syntax, or pronunciation are unique, are regarded as feeble or even void nowadays. This article will investigate the idiomorphic character of phonological, lexicon, grammar, syntactic, and pragmatic features of East African English in comparison with Standard British English. In order for this linguistic analysis to be conducted, various examples from East African resources were extracted. Not only does this analysis shed light on the multi-faceted aspects of East African English that is the result of a marriage between the ''native'' nature and the standard inventory lexicon, phonology, grammar and syntax of British English, but it also stresses the importance of treasuring one's own culture.

Keywords: *language attitudes, idiomorphic features, phonology, lexicon, grammar, syntax, pragmatics, unique stylistic elements, nativisation*

Introduction

East African English has a wealth of idiomorphic features which manifest the richness of the English language. From a simple observation of East African linguistic features, one can

notice sophisticated words and phrases, such as *delicateness*, *normalcy*, *in vain* or the metaphor *tame suicide*. Generally speaking, English has played a varied role across East Africa, and this phenomenon can be explained on historical and socio-political grounds. For example, Kenya and Tanzania employed different socio-political and cultural policies in regards to the place of English within the social context. Tanzania, since gaining independence in the 1960s, has widely promoted and established the exclusive use of Kiswahili; however, there are opponents to this stance. Recently, there was a debate in Tanzania as to whether Kiswahili has to be the medium of instruction. Those who adhere to the view that the national language should be taught claim that a good foundation of one's native language facilitates the transfer of literacy skills from L1 to L2, and consequently the further development of L2, which is, in this case, English. In particular, the chief executive officer of the Consortium for Independent Education Providers in Sub-Saharan Africa, Benjamini Nkonya, pointed out that ''If a country fails to have one language of instruction in schools it translates to confusing children'' (Devotha, 2018). Kenyan society, on the other hand, seems to be divided on the issue of whether British Standard English or East African English has to be used. The supporters of the former view claim that knowing only the East African English variety renders one socially and economically disadvantaged, while those who advocate for the latter view assert that any linguistic deviations are reflective of the society's culture (Kembo Sure, 2003). In an attempt to mediate between the two polarised views, I believe that the education system in East Africa has to cater for teaching the British Standard English so that students have opportunities for international studies and jobs; however, speaking a variety of English in social and personal encounters should not be criticised or stigmatised. Kiswahili or the other native languages constitute the foundation

and spirit of East African society, just as depriving the Afrikaans of their own language would cause disharmony and confusion regarding their own identity. In any case, regardless of the dichotomy of the views regarding the role of English in East African society, East African English has to be studied systematically in order that its unique characteristics can be seen out and accepted as exceptional characteristics of the society and culture. In an attempt to accentuate the native idiosyncrasy of East African English, a comparative analysis of East African English with British Standard English follows. The analysis concerns the phonology, lexis, grammar, syntax, and pragmatics of the two language systems and is also embellished with a wealth of examples drawn from the 'heartland' of East Africa – namely, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (Schmied, 2004a).

The idiomatic character of East African English is attributed to the impact of English, the East African national language, and native languages; however, it seems that the East African language system has been framed predominantly by the features of native East African lexis, syntax and semantics (Zuengler, 1992).

The phonological system of East African English contains distinct features which have been formed upon the impact of mother tongues spoken across East Africa (Abdulaziz, 1991). Coupled with this, Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya and Tanzania, influenced the development of East African English because it was believed to approximate British English in terms of their phonological features (Abdulaziz, 1991). The main impact of Kiswahili language lies in the reduced number of vowels -only five- that East African phonological system contains (Schmied, 2008). A characteristic phonological feature in East African English is the realisation of /ʌ/ and /ə/ as /a/ in final syllables such as *er*, *or*, *our*, *ure*, *ous*, et cetera (Simo Bobda, 2000). The reason why the sound / ʌ / (or STRUT vowel) is pronounced

as /a/ is because when the British settled in East Africa '' . . . the STRUT vowel had already been fronted, with /a/ being the closest phoneme from the phonetic inventory of the African languages'' (Simo Bobda, as cited in Wolf, 2010, p. 199). In addition, the central vowel /ɜː/ tends to be pronounced as /e/ or /a/ in words like *burn* and *bird* (Schmied, 2008; Wolf, 2010). The second element of the diphthongs like /eɪ/ is normally not pronounced, whereas the diphthongs /oɪ/ and /au/ tend to be pronounced as double monophthongs (Schmied, 2008). Other phonological irregularities are the omission of /r/ in words like *car* and of nasals like /n/ before plosives (Schmied, 2008). Mergers occur often in East African English: /tʃ/, /ʃ/ and /s/ amalgamated with /dʒ/, /ʒ/ and/z/, respectively (Schmied, 2008). Schmied (2008) notes that when two or more consonants are attached to each other, the final ones are usually marginalised, such as [neks] for *next*. Simo Bobda (2000) reports the phonological phenomenon of ''epenthesis'', where vowels tend to be embedded within consonants in order to create more open syllables- for example, [hosɪpɪtalɪ] for *hospital* (Schmied, 2004a) and [kɔnɪfɪdɛns] for *confidence-* or added to the end of words such as [started[ə]]. Simo Bobda (2000) also observes the insertion of /ɔ/ to words ending in /l/, such as /lɔkɔl/ instead of /ləʊk(ə)l/ in Standard English. Regarding pronunciation, in East Africa there is a tendency to use homophones. For example, *show* and *so* are pronounced the same way, without distinguishing the subtle phonological difference (Schmied, 2008). Finally, East Africans stress words equally, tending towards a stress-timed, and not the syllable-timed rhythm of Standard English. For example, they pronounce the noun *protest* and the verb *protest* in the same way (Schmied, 2004a).

At the lexis level, Schmied (2008) claims that the nucleus of East African English derives from the principal lexicon system of Standard English along with idioms and loans;

nevertheless, the latter ones seem to employ a less specific meaning- for example, *safari* means ''any journey'' (Schmied, 2004a). More importantly, the East African language system has a propensity to marry native lexical forms with English at the spoken discourse level; this occurs when there are no corresponding English words to convey the same meaning as in the African language (Zuengler, 1992). This tendency is reflected in the inclusion of culture-driven lexical items in the Corpus of East African English. For example, loans from Kiswahili such as *askari*, *matatu, ugali* (boiled cornmeal), *kuni* (firewood) or particles joined with a word (*–ni*) are located in East African English (Schmied, 2004b; Zuengler, 1992; Schmied, 2008). Zuengler (1992) adds that notions related to nationhood are always rendered in Kiswahili in Kenya. In addition, East African English retains its own words for landscapes, plants and animals, whereas words related to food are culture-driven or are borrowed from Asia, such as *chai* (Schmied, 2008). Similarly, words referring to family, clothes, customs, politics and economy are expressed with native words (Schmied, 2008, 2004b). Interestingly, the interference of African English with Standard English is evident in a range of speech functions, such as greetings (*Is it well with you?*), forms of address (*son of my mother*), and threats (*You will know who I am*) (Zuengler, 1992). Furthermore, there are coined phrases emanating from the native language thesaurus: *slowly by slowly-* ''take it easy''; *talk nicely-* ''give a bribe''; *we shall meet/ talk-* ''farewell'' (Skandera, as cited in Schneider, 2007). Furthermore, East Africans tend to alter the meanings of English words- for instance, *to book-* ''to hire''; *to forget-* ''to lose''; to *cut-* ''to refuse''; heavy- ''pregnant''; *township-* ''small town'' (Schmied, 2008, 2004a; Schneider, 2007); *low-cadre jobs-* ''low-level jobs'' (Omondi, 2018). Alternatively, existing English words tend to expand into new words with different, ''extended'' connotations such as: *clocking* 75 years of age-

''reaching''(Buregyeya, 2018); *joblessly; overlisten*; *pedestrate-* ''walk''; *young husband-* ''son''; *dry coffee-* ''coffee without milk or sugar''; *wife inheritance-* ''widow inherited by brothers of the deceased husband''; *brat-* ''illegitimate child'' (Schneider, 2007; Zuengler, 1992). A further illustration of this is the item *sorry*, which has stretched its meaning to sympathising because there was not an equivalent word in the African language to fulfil this function (Schmied, 2004a). Kembo- Sure (2003) provides a list of neologisms in East African English (see Appendix A). Finally, there are words which employ a different meaning than in Standard English, such as *exchange information*, which means ''compare'' in East Africa (Schmied, 2004a), or *put up with this year's theme* which carries the meaning of ''support this year's theme''. In relation to this, in the following example (. . . *water drainage systems are well fixed to ensure reliable supply of water*. . .) it seems that *well-maintained* would express the meaning of the clause more appropriately than ''well fixed'' (Langama, 2018). Similarly, ''reduce'' would be more suitable in the phrase *to tame suicides* (Omollo, 2018) and ''distant'' could be used as an alternative to *far* in the phrase *in far places* (Nalianya, 2018). Occasionally, one might come across words that would be challenging to define their exact meaning such as *Isn't that democracy thicker than what you are advocating?* (Batte Lule, 2018). In this case, the reader, who is not familiar with the lexical idiosyncrasies in East African English, could interpret *thicker than* as either ''preferable to'' or ''friendlier'', or simply he/she could not be able to interpret this word. On the other hand, some meanings of English words have been constrained, such as the word *escort*, which means ''accompany'', employing a wider meaning than in British Standard English (Schmied, 2004a). Similarly, *brothers* and *sisters* are used as reference and address forms. Schmied (2008) mentions that

mother may refer to the adult female member of the nuclear family or to one of her co-wives or sisters, or any elderly woman from the same village without any blood relation to the speaker. (p.196)

Lastly, idiomatic phrases or collocations are used with a different form, such as *as regards* instead of ''with regards to'' (Schmied, 2008) and *to such effect* as a substitute for ''to this effect'' (Nalianya, 2018) or consist of different words, specifically more general, than Standard English, such as *an election is done* instead of ''an election is held''- *to commit an action* instead of ''to commit a crime'' (Schmied, 2008, 2004a) or ''silence means consent'' instead of ''gives'' (Schmied, 2004a).

Moving to grammar characteristics, Buregeya (2006) showed that students in Nairobi embraced 14 out of 26 peculiar grammar features of Kenyan English, such as *second-born* and *enable them improve (*Schneider, 2007). Admittedly, in East African English there are irregular grammatical features differentiating it from Standard English. Firstly, verbs tend not to be inflected but rather to hold general endings. For example, in the sentence *K.shs.33, 500/- was raised during our pre-wedding*, Standard English would use ''were'' instead of ''was'' (Schmied, 2008). Further to this, East Africans seem to use a more simplified form of tenses. For example, past perfect and conditionals are normally not used, while ''will'' forms are used to express modality in place of past tenses (Schmied, 2008). Moreover, Schmied (2008) mentions that East Africans use continuous forms of verbs in almost every context, as in the example *Some of us may think that women always are having a lot of things to do* (Schmied, 2008). The complements of phrasal, prepositional or modal verbs are flexible in East African English. For example, they can be left out, as in '' *. . . to send his driver to pick her at the school for a rendezvous*'' instead of ''pick up'' (Schmied, 2008); *allow him go* by

analogy with ''let him go'' (Schmied, 2004a) and . . . *that she had walk. . .* (Wanjala, 2018) instead of ''she had to walk''. Or they can be ''creative'', for instance *stay/remain with, discuss about, made him to do it, mind to tell* (Schneider, 2007). Likewise, the structure of infinitives and gerunds is not distinguished (*tried to walk* and *tried walking*) but rather is used unsystematically (Schmied, 2004a) such as . . . *which aim at promote . . .* in place of ''at promoting'' (Msikula, 2018) and *as a way of preserving water sources and enable sustainable water . . .* (Lengama, 2018) where the writer did not join parallel sentence structures (''preserving, enabling'') by using the co-ordinating conjunction ''and''.

As for the nouns, the use of –s for the plural form is overgeneralised and applied even for uncountable words such as *luggages, furnitures, grasses* (Schmied, 2008) or in the phrase *in its powers* (Lengama, 2018). Additionally, East African English tends not to include articles and determiners before nouns, such as '*I am going to church/school*'' (Schmied, 2008) or . . . *it declared Matsiko winner* instead of ''the winner'' (Batte Lule, 2018) and . . . . *up to 19.5 million Kenyans are active in the labour force, majority of them. . .* where, similarly, the definite article before the noun ''majority'' has been omitted (Omondi, 2018). Also, pronouns are not used based on gender, thus the subject pronouns overlap with the possessive ones, a feature that is attributed to interference from East African mother tongues which have no distinct forms to indicate gender (Schmied, 2008). The forms of adverbs are not distinguishable from the forms of the adjectives, while question tags maintain the same construction irrespective of the verb tense and form, as well as the subject- for instance, ''*There we are, isn't it?*'' (Schmied, 2008, 2004a). In relation to this, in East Africa, the particles yes/no are given in response to the question and not to the answer, as in Standard English- that is '*Q: These problems are uh not biological? A: Yes, they're not biological*

factor'' (Schmied, 2004a). As a final point, East Africans have a propensity to overuse the relative pronoun *which* as a replacement of ''whom'' and ''whose'' (*Adult education which its main purpose. . .*) (Schmied, 2004a).

In terms of prepositional usage, Mwangi (2004) states that East African language simplifies the prepositions as a ''safety strategy'' (Schmied, 2004a) to a degree that they tend to fade. For example, in the following sentence, the preposition *in* is used by analogy with the preposition *into*: ''. . . *Now imagine like Flo's hair yeah if that thing just decides to go in it*'' (Mwangi, 2004). Likewise, in the following example, *on* is used as a substitute of *onto* as it would be in Standard English: ''*smile Flies flit from pus-drooping eyes Sling it on the arm . . .*'' (Mwangi, 2004). Moreover, East Africans tend to use *in* in lieu of *at* in phrases such as *in the meeting* and *in the party*, or instead of *on* as shown in the following example: ''. . . *I believe this should have been somewhere in the coast*'' (Mwangi, 2004). In order to express a meaning pertaining to space, the preposition *from* fulfils the function of the preposition *off* in Standard English. As such, East Africans would say *she was pulling things from the tables* instead of ''off the tables'' (Mwangi, 2004), or *switch out* in place of ''switch off'' because the meaning of *out* and *off* are similar (Schmied, 2004a). Findings revealed that *down* is only used in its actual sense and not in metaphors, for which *along* is preferred, including *along the road* in replacement of ''down the road'' (Mwangi, 2004). In addition, the fact that the preposition *under* is used instead of *beneath* and *underneath* indicates the inclination of East Africans to eliminate the delicate semantic nuances amongst prepositions (Mwangi, 2004). *Under* expresses a general meaning compared to the meaning of *underneath* which implies ''. . . contact or separation between related entities'' (Boers, as cited in Mwangi, 2004, p. 31). Equally, *beyond* is used instead of *past* to indicate location, which again carries a general

meaning compared to the specific meaning of *past* (Mwangi, 2004). Coupled with this, East Africans neglect the subtle difference between *besides* and *beside* (Schmied, 2004a). The reason why East Africans prefer to simplify the use of prepositions could be attributed to the already simplified prepositional system in Kiswahili, where one preposition, such as *mwituni*, engages a plethora of prepositional meanings (Schmied, 2004a). Besides, not only do East Africans tend to simplify prepositions, but they also mould new ones (*in reference to, in respect to, with a view of*) that are rather peculiar (Mwangi, as cited in Schneider, 2007) or use the existing ones in an unorthodox way (*concentrate with, congratulate with*), which can also be detected in segments from Tanzanian newspapers, such as *indulge on, a cause to* (Mwangi, as cited in Schneider, 2007) and . . . *was already on progress. . .* in place of ''in progress'' (Msikula, 2018). In the following clauses . . . e*xperts will facilitate capacity building to local doctors . . .* (Kazoka, 2018) and *The spokesperson of the Immigration Department. . .* (Kolumbia, 2018) the preposition ''*for* ''is preferable to the preposition *of*. Finally, from the observations it can be inferred that a noun rather than the structure –ing is mostly used after a proposition . . . *the court faulted the High court for failure. . .* (Batte Lule, 2018) and . . . *after questions she was released. . .* (Kolumbia, 2018).

In terms of syntax, East African English words tend to play a different syntactic role than this in Standard English. For instance, the word order seems not to be congruous with the syntactic rules of direct and indirect speech, such as in ''*I would like to know as to where and when are you going. . .* '' (Schmied, 2004a). Furthermore, reduplication is an interesting syntactic phenomenon (*long long one*) (Zuengler, 1992) or . . . *that was brought before it before it. . .* (Batte Lule, 2018). Interestingly, a mixture of prepositions can also occur *(. . . after a successful challenge of by FDC'S Betty Muzanira.*) (Batte Lule, 2018), while the

position of the adverbs can be irregular, such as in ''*Already appeals have been sent*...''
(Schmied, 2004a) or *... to properly evaluate...* (Batter Lule, 2018). Finally, in oral speech,
East Africans tend to position reflexive pronouns before personal pronouns- for instance,
''*Uh myself uh I am...* '' (Schmied, 2004a). Likewise, East Africans repeat a noun by using a
pronoun after it, such as in ''*so human being in the first time of his existence he found...* ''
(Schmied, 2004a).

In an attempt to analyse pragmatics in East African English, researchers have investigated
cultural conventions and stylistic and grammar features used in written and spoken discourse.
Features of East African oral speech can be detected in a fragment of oral narrative (see
Appendix B). Thus, it can be noticed that first- person (*I*) and third-person (*he*) pronouns
prevail, while the collocation *You know* is used as a linking word in East Africa (Biber, as
cited in Terblanche, 2016). Adverbs of time (*in the evening*) and place (*there*) contribute to
the contextualisation of the event that is narrated. Also, present tense is mostly used for the
narration of events- for example '' *... He gives love potion so the woman goes and tells him
uh she's unhappy...* '' (Terblanche, 2016). Markedly, Schmied (2008) acknowledges that
linguistic features that stem from the East African culture and are only known to members of
East African society are used in topics related to family, customs or environment. For
example, East Africans use to greet each other with very good manners and enquire about the
family or health of the interlocutor before proceeding to their query (Schmied, 2008). In
contrast, in Standard English, requests are made directly, as in *Would you mind telling me*
(Schmied, 2008). Also, East Africans maintain a conversation with non-verbal features and
by nodding along with the sound *eehee* (Schmied, 2004a). In addition to features of spoken
discourse, East Africans tend to sympathise with their interlocutor if he/she has come across a

mishap, using the word *pole* (Schmied, 2008) or showing surprise by uttering *kumbe* (Scmhied, 2004a). Accordingly, findings demonstrated that Kenyans are inclined to use Kiswahili and other ethnic languages in informal contexts such as family or social life, while using English in formal surroundings such as education or professional life (Budohoska, 2011; Schmied, 2004b). In particular, the findings revealed that phrases communicating personal views occur less often in Kenyan English than in British English (Budohoska, 2011); consequently, this verifies that the English language is mostly employed for formal purposes in Kenya (Budohoska, 2011). Additional evidence that English in Kenya maintains a high level of formality is the use of full forms in spoken discourse, which is in contrast to British English, where their use denotes formality in written speech (Budohoska, 2011). Finally, intensifiers, which are indicative of informal language (Budohoska, 2011), are used less often in Kenyan English than in British English (Budohoska, 2011), which proves that Kenyan English maintains its formal features.

The distinct stylistic characteristics of written speech in East African English can be better comprehended within context. Gumperz (1992) suggests that one has to focus on the ''contextualisation cues'' in order to understand a written text in Kenyan English. For example, in an extract from a Kenyan newspaper- *The Sunday Nation* (See Appendix C) (Kembo-Sure, 2003) - there are many native words inserted, such as *motisha* and *kitu* or *wananchi* located in an extract from a Tanzanian newspaper- *Daily News* (Lengama, 2018) and *ssaza, gombolola*, *miluka* from a newspaper in Uganda- *The Observer* (Batte Lule, 2018). Kembo- Sure notices that code switching is common practice in Kenya to such a degree that it is regarded as a ''feature of good writing'' (Kembo-Sure, 2003). Also, the morphology of some local words is influenced by English. For example, in the extract from the Kenyan

newspaper, *unbowable* is a native word to which the English prefix –un and suffix –able have been added (Kembo-Sure, 2003). Similar to this, the word *mangamangad* stems from the Kiswahili word *mangamanga* but the ending –ed has been attached by analogy with the English ending –ed (Kembo-Suree, 2003). On the other hand, written narratives display a range of linguistic features, as can be seen in an extract from a Tanzania newspaper (see Appendix D). Proper nouns for persons (*Hanahela, Hanapendo*) and third- person pronouns (*she, him*) dominate, whereas activity verbs (*used, had given*) are used in past simple and perfect aspect, which are characteristic tenses of narratives in East African fiction (Biber, as cited in Terblanche, 2016). Finally, adverbs of time, such as *for two days* and adverbs of place, such as *around* situate the action within a particular time and place. (Terblanche, 2016). Another stylistic feature of East African English is the use of native words in metaphors (*light that comes from wires in dry trees to make day out of night*) and the use of Biblical style (*The white man cannot speak the language of the hills. And knows not the ways of the land*) (Zuengler, 1992). Bamgbose (as cited in Zuengler, 1992, p. 118) claims that this particular style could be a ''stylistic echo of tradition'', while Zuengler (1992) asserts that this style traces its roots back to oral literature. In the newspapers, information tends to be presented at an abstract level, a style which is realised with nominalisations, namely a great deal of nouns in the East African newspapers (Schmied & Hudson- Ettle, 1996). In addition, a wealth of –ing forms and adverbial –ing clauses are used to portray facts, such as '' . . . *his bloodshot eyes bulging. . .*''; and ''. . . *his head veins looking. . .* '' (Schmied & Hudson- Ettle, 1996). Finally, Biber (as cited in Schmied & Hudson-Ettle, 1996, p. 108) argues that the reduced relative and adverbial –ing clauses are ''well suited to the production of highly informational discourse under time constraints'', - for instance, ''*Other people, acting on*

humanitarian grounds . . .'' or *He said 700 passengers, on realising the boat was sinking . . .''.*

In conclusion, East African English is distinct for its nativisation, and hence it has to be seen within the East African linguistic and sociocultural context (Kachru, as cited in Zuengler, 1992). As Kembo- Sure (2003) claims: ''In discourse the speaker and the hearer must agree that the ultimate goal of every exchange is to understand each other by observing certain discourse rules understood by both parties'' (p. 207).

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Appendix A

Modified forms

Kenyan English   British English

be on talking terms	**be on speaking terms**
can be able	**Can**
fill	**fill in**
cope up	**cope**
at par	**on a par**
leave alone	**let alone**
quite fine	**quite well**

New meanings

Kenyan English   British English

upcountry	a small town
something small	a bribe
move with	have a romantic liaison with

Appendix B

Well yah **I** have these memories living with my grandfather who was a very very old man. . .
So **I** had the chance of living in a round thatched hut where everything took place **there**
cooking The fire-place is **there** My grandfather is **there In the evening he** would be telling
us stories because **he** was a warrior my grandfather. . . **You know** the Kikuyus and the
Maasais they used to have tribal wars. . .

Appendix C

A political Crisis in My Family

Whispers Junior then started whispering things to me. He whispered that he had examined
both his heart and head and found that both were not working well. He said that he was now
looking for medicine to cure both organs and has seen it in the Rainbow. He added that from
the moment, his surgeon-general was Emilio Mwai Kibaki.

I was, of course, very happy to know that I had an ally in the form of Whispers Junior and
now the song became, 'We are **unbwogable**' Who can **bwogo** us?' Every time we sung that
song, the fellow took me aside and whispered, '**Mbuyu**, any chance of something to increase
saliva? **Si mzee Kibaki ni economist**? **Si anajua kitu kinaitwa motisha** or motivation?

Yaani motivation to make the mouth sing for him? **Sema na huyo dongera wa kutoka Othaya**.'

I kept telling the fellow that the man from Othaya deals with bigger things than making sure that people chewed twigs and that is when he started looking at me in a way to suggest that I have a shortage of thinking stuff in my head. So when he came and declared that he was now an ally of his sister in crowing like a chicken, I was not shocked. He had **mangamangad** yet again.

Appendix D

She had not seen **Hanahela for two days** and decided to check **him** at his residence in Buguruni and surprised **Hanahela** was not **around.** . . **Hanapendo** used the key he **had given** her. . .

Also, I wish I could read books written by Angogo and Hancock or Skandera but unfortunately my university library does not have them available: