





## **Intonation and Attitude in Nigerian English**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Intonation is an important phenomenon in language believed to have strong effect on communication. It is often said in reference to the primacy of intonation meaning over lexical content that "It's not what you said, it's how you said it!". To this effect, a number of scholars have argued that intonation conveys different attitudes in English and is principally responsible for misunderstandings between native and non-native English speakers. This paper, therefore, attempts to ascertain the extent to which Nigerian speakers of English use English intonation tunes to express attitude as it is in Standard British English. Twenty-two subjects comprising television reporters using English for their professional assignments and confirmed to have been exposed to basic training in English intonation during their academic studies and/or in the course of their professional training were made to read five utterance items designed to test their knowledge of attitudinal function of intonation. The analysis shows that the respondents were deficient in the use of English intonation tunes to express attitude as they only scored 15.5% overall appropriate production of intonation tunes in the utterance items. It was concluded that the subjects demonstrated a restricted use of intonation in communication, as intonation was rarely used to express attitude. This confirms earlier claims that Nigerian English users make restricted use of the complex intonation tunes of English especially those tunes assigned to reflect the speaker's attitude to the listener or what is being said.

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Language Situation in Nigeria**

Nigeria has been described as a 'linguistically pluralistic entity' due to her linguistic diversity (Bamgbose, 1995; Oguniji, 2004; Ikonta and Maduekwe, 2006). However, the official number of languages spoken in Nigeria still remains elusive. In the absence of an official linguistic database, various figures have been posited. While Hansford, Brender-Samuel and Stranford (1976) pegged the number at 390 languages, Bamgbose (1971) and Jibril (1982) put it at about 400 and 200 respectively. In the same vein, Crozier and

### *Intonation and Attitude in Nigerian English*

Blench (1992:4) posited about 436 languages; Adebija (1998) proposed 400, while Akinjobi (2004) put forward 470 living languages based on Grimes (1996) Ethnologue estimate. Jowitt (1995), however, argues for a figure as low as 250 for the reason that many of the languages included in the quoted figures are already extinct or approaching extinction.

These indigenous languages have been grouped into major and minor languages. While Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba constitute the major languages, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Kanuri, Esan, Tiv, Fulfude and a host of others are referred to as the minority languages. However, none of these languages, major or minor, cuts well across regional boundaries.

Consequent upon the multilingual setting of Nigeria and the resultant difficulty of adopting any of the indigenous languages as an acceptable national language, English has assumed the position of the national and official language as well as the lingua franca, functioning as the bridge between these multiple languages. Although the three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are constitutionally recognized as national languages alongside English (Nigerian Constitution 1999, chap. V, Section 55: A 908), none of them is able to match the enviable status English commands in the Nigerian society as a result of the functions it performs. It serves, amongst other functions, as the language of inter-ethnic communication, formal education, government administration, commerce and industry, international communication, the media and national integration (Ogu, 1992; Akindele & Adebite, 1999; Ogunsiji, 2004).

In view of this, English has been adapted to suit the indigenous cultures, traditions, conveniences, experiences, nuances and sensibilities (Akindele and Adebite, 1999; Adebija, 2004) thereby converting it into a second language with a distinctive Nigerian flavour (Bamgbose, 1995). This, in turn, has subjected English in Nigeria to systematic and marked variation from Standard British English, particularly at phonological level.

#### **Intonation**

Over the years, scholars have widely acknowledged the fact that there is a strong and important relationship between intonation and attitude (Roach, 2000). Pike (1972:56 cited in Atoye, 2005), in this regard, comments that: "If one says something insulting, but smiles in face and voice, the utterance may be a great compliment; but if one says something very complimentary but with an intonation of contempt, the result is an insult". Through intonation, attitudes such as detachment, protesting, showing interest, being impressed, encouragement, being bored, being grateful, and being angry etc. can be expressed within the same sentence. O'Connor (2000) believes that the intonation tune we use is capable of adding feelings to our words. In this regard, O'Connor and Arnold, (1973) and O'Connor, (2000) are especially of the opinion that using incorrect intonation can result in misunderstanding or unintentionally giving offence. O'Connor and Arnold (1973), for instance, list 500 different attitudes which can be conveyed through intonation and

opine that native speakers of English are so much less able to make allowance for mistakenly used tones than for imperfect sound-making. O'Connor (2000:108) buttresses this with the illustration of how "thank you" may be made to give a rather casual or impolite impression or a genuinely grateful one by the use of intonation tones. A low-to-high tone which denotes casual acknowledgement instead of the expected high-to-low tone which denotes gratitude may lead to misunderstanding.

According to Roach (2000: 188-189):

1. Fall signifies finality, definiteness, e.g.
  - (i) That is the end of the news.
  - (ii) Stop talking.
2. Rise marks the attitude of encouraging, e.g.
  - (i) It won't hurt.
3. Fall-rise denotes uncertainty and requesting as in the following examples;
  - (ii) You may be right. (uncertainty)
  - (iii) Will you lend it to me. (requesting)
4. Rise-fall signifies surprise or being impressed, e.g.
  - (i) You were first.
  - (ii) All of them.

Cruttenden (1986: 100-102) also posits that the falling tones (i.e. low-fall, high-fall and rise-fall) indicate a sense of finality, completeness, definiteness and separateness when used with declaratives. He notes further that while the 'low-fall' generally signals disinterest, unexcitement and dispassion; the 'high-fall' indicates more interest, more excitement and more involvement, e.g.

- (i) Low-fall: He stayed for three hours(interested)
- (ii) High-fall He stayed for three hours(uninterested)

Similarly, when used with interrogatives and imperatives, the low-fall tends to be hostile, e.g.

(I've just started writing my new book) Have you?

He further states that the rise-fall tone can also be associated with other attitudinal meanings like 'impressed' and 'challenging', e.g.

- (i) (He got a first) Did he! / At Cambridge, / too! (impressed)
- (ii) (I need a nice long holiday) Don't we all! (challenging)

It is however pertinent to note that determination of attitudinal meaning is context-dependent. This is because an intonation pattern taken out of context is likely to convey different attitude to different people in different situations. Thus, as Gimson (1989) suggests, "the attitudinal meaning of an utterance must always be interpreted within a context, both of the situation and also of the speaker's personality".

However, in the Nigerian linguistic context, as in most second language situation, it is claimed that intonation is rarely used to express attitude. It is against this backdrop this paper seeks to ascertain the extent to which

### *Intonation and Attitude in Nigerian English*

Nigerian television reporters use English intonation to express attitude as it is in Standard British English.

#### **Intonation and Attitude in Nigeria English**

As earlier noted, various studies have claimed that intonation is put to restricted use amongst the speakers of English in Nigeria as it is rarely used to express attitude. Jowitt (1991) is of the opinion that the rich intonational resources of Standard British English suffer neglect among the Nigerian speakers of English and this affects communication in Nigerian English. Thus, according to him, public officials may sound needlessly and unintentionally rude as a result of their inability to use the appropriate tune.

Earlier, Tiffen (1974) had reported that the intonation of non-native English speakers poses serious intelligibility problems to native speakers of the language. This is not unconnected with the restricted use to which intonation is put in the second language situation. Adetugbo's (2004), also supporting this view, observes that the attitudinal nuances that arise from the native speakers' slight modification of these tone patterns are hardly recognized in Nigerian English. These observations agree with Adejuwon's (2003) discovery that radio broadcasters in South Western Nigeria are only aware of the grammatical use of intonation tunes. In the test he administered to forty broadcasters, 73% was scored in the grammatical function of intonation against 34% in discourse function, 18.8% in attitudinal function and 3.3% in accentual function.

Atoye (2005), in his study of non-native perception and interpretation of English intonation observes that "non-native speakers of English are, understandably, at a loss when faced with the task of using intonation in their English speech...They avoid the use of intonation, resorting instead to paraphrasing...in order to make their meaning clear". He concluded, based on his findings, that the subjects, who were Nigerian undergraduates, were unable to provide correct intonation meaning to the native speakers' speech. He claims they therefore have a tendency to sound unintelligible, rude, pompous or insulting to native speakers as a result of unintentional misuse of intonation tunes.

The reasons for this are not difficult to unravel. First, Nigerian languages are predominantly tone languages which use pitch to signal a difference in meaning between words (Avery and Ehrlich, 1992:77). And as Tench (1996) argues, tone languages only put intonation to a limited use when compared to the elaborate use in a stress-timed language like English. Nigerian English intonation is, therefore, said to tend towards the tonal structure of speakers' native languages (Amayo, 1981; Well, 1982; Gut, 2001).

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## METHODOLOGY

Twenty-two subjects were used for this study. They were television reporters, who have been exposed to basic training in English intonation during their academic studies and/or in the course of their professional training, using English for their professional assignments. They were made to read five utterance items designed to test their knowledge of attitudinal function of intonation. Each item contains an instruction meant to guide the respondents. The utterance items were designed to reflect the following structures and attitudes:

1. Tag Question Confirming Information (TQCI)
2. Statement Showing Reservation (SSR)
3. Tag Question Seeking Information (TQSI)
4. Statement Expressing Contrast (SEC)
5. Expression of Being Impressed (EBI)

### Analysis and Findings

The subjects' responses were graded based on their appropriate production of each utterance appraised against the model of production provided in English Phonetics and Phonology by Peter Roach and Better English Pronunciation by J. D. O'Connor and accompany audio cassettes from where the utterances were drawn. The analysis and findings are presented below:

#### Utterance–By–Utterance Appropriate Production of Intonation Tunes

Each appropriate production was allotted 1 mark, making the maximum mark obtainable five. All the subjects' scores per utterance item were then converted to percentage scores. Table 1 and figure 1 below show the utterance-by-utterance appropriate production of intonation tunes by all the subjects.

Table 1. Utterance–By–Utterance Appropriate Production of Intonation Tunes

S/N	UTTERANCE TYPE	INTONATION TUNE	POTENTIAL SCORE	ACTUAL SCORE	PERCENTAGE %
1	TQCI	Fall	22	3	13.6
2	SSR	Fall-Rise	22	0	0
3	TQSI	Rise	22	13	59.1
4	SEC	Fall-Rise	22	1	4.5
5	EBI	Rise-Fall	22	0	0
TOTAL			110	17	15.5

### *Intonation and Attitude in Nigerian English*

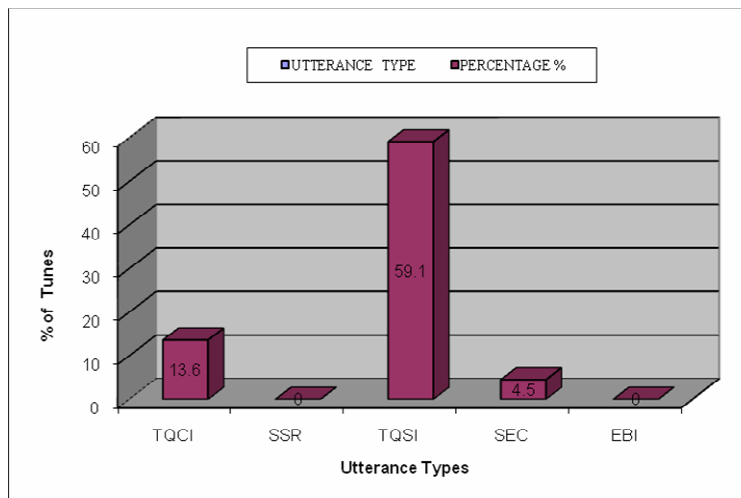


Fig. 1. Utterance by Utterance Appropriate Production of Intonation Tunes

As observed from Table 1, the subjects recorded very low scores in TQCI and an average performance in TQSI. Only three (13.6%) and thirteen (59.1%) of them produce TQCI and TQSI respectively with the appropriate tunes. Nine (40.9 %) of them imposed a fall on TQSI which normally takes the rising tune to show that the speaker is genuinely demanding information, while on the other hand, nineteen (86.4%) of the subjects produced TQCI (which should ordinarily take a fall indicating that the speaker only expects his listener to confirm what he already knows) with the rising tune. This mix up, apparently, stemmed from the fact that the subjects are not used to varying tunes on tag questions for attitudinal purposes.

This is also the case in SEC which was intended to express the attitude of contrast and as such should take the fall-rise tune. However, twenty-one (95.5%) of the subjects used the falling tune, thereby treating it like an unmarked declarative statement. This situation buttresses the fact that intonation is not usually used for implicational meaning in Nigeria. It also confirms Jowitt's (1991) observation that the Nigerian speaker of English employs the falling tune as the only choice where SBE normally would allow options based on the attitude being expressed.

The foregoing becomes more apparent when the subjects' production of SSR and EBI, is considered. Instead of using the fall-rise and the rise-fall tunes respectively, twenty-one (95.5%) and seventeen (77.3%) of them used fall for SSR and EBI. Failure to use the appropriate tunes on these items to express the attitude of 'reservation' and 'impressed' respectively also reveals the inability of the subjects to vary tunes to express attitude. This finding agrees with Adejuwon's (2003) discovery that radio broadcasters in South Western Nigeria are only aware of the grammatical use of intonation tunes.

Thus, our findings revealed a narrow use of intonation tunes amongst the subjects, thereby justifying Adetugbo's (2004) opinion that the attitudinal nuances that arise from the native speakers' slight modification of these tone patterns are hardly recognized in Nigerian English.

### **Overall Appropriate Production of Intonation Tunes**

The percentage score of overall appropriate production of intonation tunes was calculated. 22 subjects participated in the production of the 5 utterance items; therefore 110 potentially appropriate productions were expected. Table 2 below displays the percentage score of the actual appropriate production.

Table 2. Overall Appropriate Production of Intonation Tunes

No of Subjects	No of Utterance Types	Frequency of Utterance Items	No of Appropriate Production	Percentage
22	5	110	17	15.5

As revealed in Table 2 above, out of 110 total utterance items, only 17, corresponding to 15.5%, were appropriately produced by the subjects. Conversely, therefore, inappropriate tunes were assigned in 93 (84.5%) instances.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study have further confirmed that Nigerian users of English encounter difficulties in the appropriate use of English intonation especially for attitudinal function. Unlike in Standard British English where intonation is put to elaborate use for communication purposes which included the attitude of the speakers, the Nigerian television reporters investigated made restricted use of intonation and lack the competence to assign appropriate tunes to reflect the attitude of the speaker to the listener or what is being said. It also confirms lack of mastery of combined (complex) tunes of English which carries a lot of communication weight in the Standard form.

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*Intonation and Attitude in Nigerian English*

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***Adenike A. Akinjobi and Rotimi O. Oladipupo***

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