

ENGLISH STRESS AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN NIGERIAN LANGUAGE SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

As a second language in Nigeria, English enjoys great prestige and fulfils an essential role in the educational and economic life of the nation. It is the language of much of the country's broadcasting, many of its newspapers, and often novels and other works of literature too; of secondary and higher education, the higher courts of law, and the civil service; and of international business contacts, of course. However, in spite of the long period of teaching and learning of the English language in Nigeria, there appears to be very little evidence to show that parents and guardians particularly in some parts of the North really care much about the proficiency of the spoken English of their wards particularly at the level of stress. This paper argues that appropriate use of stress is central to the learning and teaching of English language and therefore should by no means be neglected. Remedial exercises that could be of help to both the teachers and the learners are given and recommendations on the possible solution to the problem are suggested. The papers concludes that the problem of neglect of the teaching and learning of stress in schools and colleges can best be approached through concerted efforts by the government, the community, the students, the teachers, the parents, and all the stakeholders in providing relevant teaching materials and learner friendly environment.

KEYWORDS: English Stress and its Pedagogical Implications in Nigerian Language Situation

INTRODUCTION

What is Stress?

Stress, according to Hawkins (1984), is an extra force used when pronouncing a particular word or syllable. Carr (2013) explains that English native speakers, intuitive knowledge of their language allows them to say how many syllables a word has, in the absence of any conscious knowledge of what a syllable might be, or how it might be defined. He goes on to say that, speakers can tell which syllable in a word receives most stress, in the absence of any conscious knowledge of exactly what stress might be. Maidment and Ashby (2011), state that stress affects whole syllables rather than single segments. In other words, the effect of stressing a syllable is to make it to make it more prominent and more audible than the neighbouring syllables. Thus, stress is a relational feature, unlike features such as place and manner features or vowel quality features. Therefore, while it makes perfect sense for one to ask whether an isolated vowel is, for example, high front, or whether an isolated consonant is bilabial, it can never be sensible to ask whether an isolated syllable is stressed. Matthew (1991) defines it as a phonological feature by which a syllable is heard or made more prominent than others. Matthew's definition helpful as it is though, it has to be said here and now that the prominence of sounds is relative. In other words, there is hardly any absolute measure of prominence. The way in which an isolated word is made more

prominent than other syllables in the utterance is usually by a combination of factors: (i) Length --the length of a vowel contributes to prominence. Syllables containing long vowels tend to be more prominent than those which contain short vowels, even when they are unstressed. (ii) Loudness—Hearers often perceive stressed syllables as louder than unstressed ones. This may not be unconnected with the speech production factors such as greater muscular effort in forcing air between the vocal cords, which in turn vibrates more vigorously. This increased activity is ultimately perceived as an increase in loudness. Linguists, such as Abercrombie (1967), Ladefoged (1975), Catford (1988) and Roach (1982) refer to loudness as intensity. (iii) Pitch--- This term is applied to the rate of the vibration of the vocal cords. If the pitch changes on a syllable then that syllable will be perceived as prominent. This phenomenon is commonly called pitch prominence. (iv) Quality— the quality of a sound also contributes to its prominence. In general, vowels are more prominent than consonants, but within each group there is a hierarchy. The more open a vowel is, the more prominent it is. For example, /a: / is more prominent than either /i: / or /u: /. Approximants and nasals are more prominent than fricatives, which are more prominent than stops.

It has to be said here that while all the above factors contribute to the prominence of the syllables, some are more important than the others in determining stress. It would seem logical that loudness is a major contributor to prominence, but this is not the case. The fact of the matter is this, as Katamba (1989) observes, some sounds sound louder than others by virtue of their quality. In general, as pointed out by Kuiper and Allen (1996), a stressed syllable tends to be marked by a change in pitch and, in comparison with the unstressed ones, to be longer and louder. Stress is therefore, regarded in this paper, as the result of the combination of two or more of the properties of length, loudness, pitch, quality) on a single syllable.

WORD STRESS

Understanding the nature of the English syllable helps a lot in the understanding of the English stress and this is largely so because every word is made from syllables. Each word has one, two, three or more syllables. The English language operates a syllable structure usually specified as [Co3 V Co4]. This specification states that the syllable in English can have an onset made up of no consonant at all or up to three consonants, an obligatory vowel as the nucleus, and a coda made up of no consonant at all or up to four consonants. In other words, there is no English word that begins with eight consonants, nor is there one which begins with even four consonants. The limit is three, as exemplified by words such as *splash*, *stream*, and *scratch*. Furthermore, the consonants which can appear in these initial clusters are highly restricted: the first one can only be *s* the second must be *p*, *t*, or *k*, and the third is constrained to *r*, *l* or *w*.

Word stress is the secret key to understanding English pronunciation. In the words of Elugbe (2000), saying English words with the right stress is as important as using the right consonants and vowels. He goes on to say that Nigerian speakers of English ought to take stress more seriously because it is much, much more difficult to master than the consonants and vowels. Elugbe concluded by saying that to the native speaker, an English word rendered with a wrong stress can be as offensive or embarrassing to the listener pronouncing a Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo word with a wrong tone.

Let us first examine the general nature of word stress placement in the English language before moving on to the next section of the paper.

THE PLACEMENT OF WORD STRESS

Apart from word stress, English also employs sentence stress (Bolinger 1777; Roach 2010; Finnegan 2012). In

isolation, all English words have at least one stress as we have stated above.. However in connected speech certain words are commonly unstressed. For example, the, *a, be, have, he, she, it, and, but, in, to on,* and *at* are usually unstressed. Bi-syllabic words and polysyllabic words, (the details of which will be made clear below), will contain at least one unstressed syllable. Consequently, in connected speech there will be a large number of unstressed syllables, and a smaller number of stressed ones. Alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables is the factor that provides connected speech with its characteristic rhythm.

Two or more syllable words have their own stress systems, as follows:

- Two- syllable words are stressed mostly on the first syllable, e.g.: broken, handsome, curtain, picture, farmer, baby, farmer, curfew, madam, purchase, perfume, typist, dustbin, motion, etc.
- Two-syllable words beginning with a prefix of some kind (*a-, per-, dis-, re-, com-, ex-, ab-, etc.*) are usually stressed on the second syllable. Examples: away, behind, persist, dismiss, reply, commit, exceed, concern, enjoy, conceive, convey, infer, garage, etc.
- Some three-syllable words have their stress on the middle syllable. Examples: important, receiver, approval, condition, develop, informant, consider, inherent, enjoyment, inferior, insistence, exactly, exterior, contemptuous, depression, ulterior, constant, precisely etc.
- Some other three-syllable words are stressed on the first syllable. Examples: wonderful, absolute, ignorant, covering, hopefully, hooligan, educate, elevate photograph, telephone, autograph, etc.
- Some other three-syllable words may have their stress on the third syllable. Examples: consignee, guarantor, addressee, decompose, refugee, nominee, understand, guarantee, personnel, etc.
- Four-syllable words may have their stress on the first syllable. For example: comparable, humanism, socialism, capitalist, etc.
- Some other four-syllable words may have their stress on the second syllable. For example: conservator, developing, experiment, intelligence, etc.
- Some other four-syllable words are stressed on the third syllable. Examples of four-syllable words which are stressed on the on the fourth are few and far between, but here are two of them: Vietnamese, officialise, etc.
- Words of five syllables: These words show a great variety in stress placement with some being stressed on the first, some on the second, some on the third and others on the fourth syllable as exemplified below:
 - Stressed on the first syllable: capitalism, regionalism, etc.
 - Stressed on the second syllable: comparatively, colonialism, imperialism, extraordinary, exploratory, explanatory, preparatory, irreparable, etc.
 - Stressed on the third syllable: selectivity, seniority, meritocracy, mediocrity, etc.
 - Stressed on the fourth syllable: cooperation, consideration, interdependent, parliamentarian, reintegration, etc.
- Words of six, seven and eight syllables. These words would be taken together because they are relatively few.

- Words of six syllables show three different patterns of stress placement:
 - Stressed on the third syllable: internationalize, indistinguishable, etc.
 - Stressed on the fourth syllable: vulnerability, superiority, inferiority, etc.
 - Stressed on the fifth syllable: experimentation, decolonization, etc.
- Words of seven syllables:

Stressed on the third syllable: internationalism, irresponsibility.

Stressed on the fourth syllable: egalitarianism, etc.

Stressed on the fifth syllable: intelligibility, irrevocability, etc.

Stressed on the sixth syllable: industrialization, individualization, etc.

- Combinations are treated as one word and usually have their stress on the first part. Examples: dining room, handbag, notebook, inkpot, bookcase, classroom, football, etc.
- Nouns modified by other words have their own normal stress patterns, as in the following groups: a stone building, a cotton shirt, a wooden door, a green bag, an old house, etc.
- Words that function as both nouns and verbs have the stress on the first syllable when they are nouns and on the second syllable when they function as verbs. Examples: contrast, extract, increase, protest, progress, record, insult, export, import, etc.

The above categories of word stress are by no means exhaustive. Many English words have to be learned through imitation and practice because their stress distribution is irregular. This is perhaps why Egbokhare (2003) rightly pointed out that stress is a very problematic phenomenon to Nigerian speakers of English, particularly because all the Nigerian languages (excluding Fulfulde) are tone languages, whereby pitch is used to distinguish word meaning. So that a word said with high pitch may have a different meaning from the same word said with a low one. In English, changes in pitch are used for emphasis, contrast, comparison or to express emotion, such as anger, surprise or fear and not to give a different word meaning to the sound. It is not surprising that many Nigerian speakers often have strong accents when speaking English (Jibril 1986; Adetugbo 1993; Banjo 1993; Yul-Ifude 1999).

Having seen the general nature of the English stress as represented in the discussion above, the next segment of the paper will replicate an adaptation of data on the differences on word stress placement between Standard Nigeria English and Standard British English.

VARIANT WORD STRESS PATTERNS

English sentence stress is not fixed and this causes a greater problem for Nigerian speakers. Each sentence has its own stress pattern. Stress may occur on any word in the utterance depending on what the speaker wants to convey. Put in other words, in the course of speaking English the alternation between stressed and non-stressed words is capable of changing the underlying meaning of the utterances. The Students and their teachers alike should always be made aware of this important fact of the English language. Jibril (1986), Jowitt (1991) and Atoye (2005) gave very rich samples of the rendition of variant word stress patterns in Standard Nigerian English, on the left column, and their Standard British

English equivalents on the right column on the table below:

Table 1

	-ISM Words		
1.	sTribalism	for	TRIBalism
2.	Cannibalism	for	Cannibalism
3.	Journalism	for	JOURnalism
4.	Baptism	for	Baptism
5.	Socialism	for	Socialism
6.	Nationalism	for	Nationalism
7.	Barbarism	for	BARbarism
8.	Chauvinism	for	CHAUvinism
9.	Communism	for	Communism
	-IZE Words		
10.	Mobilise	for	Mobilise
11.	Utilise	for	Utilise
12.	Analyse	for	Analyse
13.	Categorise	for	Categorise
14.	Popularise	for	Popularise
15.	Maximise	for	Maximise
16.	Pauperise	for	Pauperise
17.	Privatise	for	Privatise
18.	Minimise	for	Minimise
19.	Recognise	for	Recognise
20.	(dis)organise	for	(dis)organise
21.	Marginalise	for	Marginalise
22.	Advertise	for	Advertise
	-ATE Words		
23.	Investigate	for	Investigate
24.	Motivate	for	Motivate
25.	Permeate	for	Permeate
26.	Exterminate	for	Exterminate
27.	Demonstrate	For	Demonstrate
28.	Necessitate	For	Necessitate
29.	Penetrate	For	Penetrate
30.	Palpitate	for	Palpitate
31.	Discriminate	for	Discriminate
32.	Captivate	For	Captivate
33.	Enumerate	For	Enumerate
34.	Estimate	For	Estimate
35.	Cultivate	For	Cultivate
36.	Exaggerate	for	Exaggerate
	-FY Words		
37.	Identify	for	Identify
38.	Nullify	for	Nullify
39.	Qualify	for	Qualify
40.	Ratify	for	Ratify
41.	Certify	for	Certify
42.	Clarify	for	Clarify
45.	Justify	for	Justify
46.	Quantify	for	Quantify
47.	Signify	for	Signify
48.	Beautify	for	Beautify
49.	Magnify	for	Magnify

Adapted from: Jowitt (1991)

REMEDIAL EXERCISES

There is no disputing the fact that interference features on English from Nigeria's many primary languages, the mode of acquisition of English by Nigerians either through textbooks or from teachers who are themselves non-native speakers of the language, are some of the factors that make the development of this distinct Nigerian variety of English stress rather inevitable.

However, exercises such as the following one, using the following sentence, could also be used in the class by the teacher to assist his students in learning the basic contrastive function of stress in English. **Umar doesn't think Sadiyya should get that toy.** This sentence provides a good example of how stress shift can easily change the meaning of utterances in English. Let us now consider the meaning of the following sentences with the stressed word in **bold**. Thus:

Umar doesn't think Sadiyya should get that toy.

Meaning: Somebody else thinks Sadiyya should get that toy.

Umar **doesn't** think Sadiyya should get that toy.

Meaning: It's not true that Umar thinks that Sadiyya should get that toy.

Umar doesn't **think** Sadiyya should get that toy.

Meaning: That's not really what Umar means. *OR*, Umar is not sure that Sadiyya will get that toy.

Umar doesn't think **Sadiyya** should get that toy.

Meaning: Somebody else, but not Sadiyya, should get that toy.

Umar doesn't think Sadiyya **should** get that toy.

Meaning: In the opinion of Umar, it is wrong that Sadiyya is going to get that toy.

Umar doesn't think Sadiyya should **get** that toy.

Meaning: Sadiyya should have to earn (be worthy of, pay money for it) that toy.

Umar doesn't think Sadiyya should get **that** toy.

Meaning: Sadiyya should get another toy, but not that one.

Umar doesn't think Sadiyya should get that **toy**.

Meaning: Maybe Sadiyya should get something instead of that toy.

SUGGESTED DRILLS

Here is an exercise to help you develop the art of correct word stress. Take the following sentence:

I Said she Might Consider a New Haircut

Say the sentence aloud using the stress word marked in **bold**. Once you have spoken the sentence a few times, match the sentence version to the meaning below. You will find the Answers to this exercise are given below.

- I said she might consider a new haircut.

- I **said** she might consider a new haircut.
- I said **she** might consider a new haircut.
- I said she **might** consider a new haircut.
- I said she might **consider** a new haircut.
- I said she might consider a **new** haircut.
- I said she might consider a new **haircut**.
- Not just a haircut.
- It's a possibility.
- It was my idea.
- Not something else.
- Don't you understand me?
- Not another person.
- She should think about it. It's a good idea.

Exercise

Write out a number of sentences. Read each of them stressing a different word each time you read them. Notice how the meaning changes depending on which word you stress. Don't be afraid to exaggerate the stress, in English fluent speakers of the language often use this device to add meaning to a sentence. It's very possible that when you think you are exaggerating, it will sound quite natural to native speakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no gainsaying stating that in any academic institution, the quality of teachers counts a lot. English language teaching requires not only competent, qualified teachers, but also the highly experienced and dedicated ones. Paucity of this calibre of teachers is most probably partly responsible for the poor quality of spoken English in Nigerian schools and colleges. To that end therefore, government and other stakeholders should do all they can to attract the services of suitably qualified teachers by among other things, improving the condition of their service. Government should, in addition, ensure that special allowances are set aside for those teachers whose specialization is in Phonetics and/ or Phonology.

Insufficiency of relevant teaching materials is also one basic problem bedevilling the effective teaching of spoken English in the country. Governments at all levels should provide sufficient, relevant and state-of the-art textbooks and other teaching materials for the schools and colleges.

Parents and guardians especially in some parts of the north, where arguably English is steadily becoming a foreign language, hardly demonstrate practical concerns in the spoken English of their wards. Intensive media (print and electronic) campaigns should be mounted in order to encourage those parents and guardians to develop interest in the

spoken English of their wards.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, the important point to remember, as far as our discussion is concerned, the true meaning of the English utterance, in addition to other linguistic and paralinguistic factors, is also expressed through the stressed word or words. This lack of awareness is perhaps what (Atoye 2005) aptly describes as the most fundamental factor responsible for the 'un-English rhythm of Nigerian spoken English'.

To improve the learners' proficiency in the mastery of the English language, particularly at the level of stress, Governments, at all the three tiers, should see to it that adequately well motivated, relevant and qualified teachers are provided for the schools and colleges. Furthermore, the governments in coordination with the community and the parents (where possible) should ensure the provision of relevant and current English textbooks, well-equipped conventional and virtual libraries, state-of-the-art language laboratories. Finally, every effort must be made by all the stake-holders to provide ample opportunities for both learners and teachers to participate in well implemented seminars and training workshops on the importance of good English pronunciation towards the promotion of educational attainment in Nigeria.

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APPENDICES

Let's look at a simple example: the modal verb "can". When we use the positive form of "can" we quickly glide over the can and it is hardly pronounced.

They can come on Friday. (Stressed words underlined)

On the other hand, when we use the negative form "can't" we tend to stress the fact that it is the negative form by also stressing "can't".

They can't come on Friday.

As you can see from the above example the sentence, "They can't come on Friday" is longer than "They can come on Friday" because both the modal "can't" and the verb "come" are stressed.

Let's return to the beginning example to demonstrate how this affects speech.

The beautiful Mountain appeared transfixed in the distance. (14 syllables)

He can come on Sunday s as long as he doesn't have to do any homework in the evening. (22 syllables)

Even though the second sentence is approximately 30% longer than the first, the sentences take the same time to speak. This is because there are 5 stressed words in each sentence. From this example, you can see that you needn't worry about pronouncing every word clearly to be understood (we native speakers certainly don't). You should however, concentrate on pronouncing the stressed words clearly.

Now, do some listening comprehension or go speak to your native English speaking friends and listen to how we concentrate on the stressed words rather than giving importance to each syllable. You will soon find that you can understand and communicate more because you begin to listen for (and use in speaking) stressed words. All those words that you thought you didn't understand are really not crucial for understanding the sense or making yourself understood. I hope this short introduction to the importance of stress in English will help you to improve your understanding and speaking skills.

