

Homophonic Errors in Nigerian ESL Speakers' WhatsApp Text Messages

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Abstract

Since the advent of the social media, Nigerians have been 'compelled' to 'speak more' and 'type more' in the public space. Nigerians who are users of English as a Second Language engage in verbal and written communication, mostly in English, on Tiktok, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp and so on. The inevitability of typing messages on social media has unveiled the spelling inaccuracies of some Nigerians which, many a time, are instigated by confusion arising from the sound convergence of certain English words. With theoretical insight drawn from Al-Khresheh's (2016) Error Analysis Theory, the homophonic lexical items that were interchangeably employed in the written online discourse of certain Nigerian English as Second Language (ESL) speakers were examined. Thirty homophonic errors were extracted from WhatsApp. Findings revealed that 60% of the identified homophonic errors were caused by Nigerian ESL speakers' departure from the Standard British English pronunciation of certain words. It was recommended that a dictionary be consulted by Nigerian ESL speakers to differentiate the meaning of homophonic words in order to use them in appropriate contexts.

Keywords: communication, homophones, WhatsApp, British English, Nigerian English

Introduction

Writing a second language is complex (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). One of the peculiar characteristics of the English language which makes it very complicated is the presence of homophones. Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different orthographic representation and semantic import. English homophones are tricky; they are often confused in written texts, especially among L2 speakers of the language. This research examined homophonic errors found in the WhatsApp text messages of certain Nigerian ESL speakers.

Previous Studies on the Error Analysis (EA) of Nigerian ESL Speakers

Error Analysis entails collecting samples of learner language and identifying, describing, classifying and evaluating the errors in the samples (Hasyim, 2002; Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). A number of research works have been carried out on the different types of errors made by Nigerian ESL speakers. Ojetunde (2013) investigated the lexical and grammatical errors in the English of some secondary school students in Epe, Lagos State. She discovered that the



grammatical errors outweighed the lexical ones with 81.06% and 18.94% respectively. Okhuosi (2018) worked on errors instigated by phonologically similar English words among students of The Polytechnic, Ibadan. She observed that vowel errors were caused by diphthongs and vowel length while consonant errors were facilitated by the place of articulation. She also noticed that the vowel sound errors outnumbered the consonant sound errors. Also, words with similar orthography and pronunciation were problematic to her recipients. Ndubisi and Ada (2020) examined the syntactic errors in the utterances of first year students of Coal City University, Enugu. They concluded that most of the errors were interlingual errors which cannot be categorised as standard Nigerian English. Francis (2022) investigated the lexical errors in the English language spoken by selected Mountain Top University students. He found that most errors made were unintended and were as a result of their being second language learners.

Mother Tongue Interference

Interference, as defined by Noviyenty and Putri (2020), is the language error caused by the infusion of the elements of mother tongue into the target language. Akindele and Adegbite (2005) further describe the phenomenon as the situation whereby there is an overlap of two different languages. This occurs as a result of the transfer of the linguistic system of one language to the second language. This transfer could occur at different linguistic levels: phonology, lexis, grammar, discourse, semantics and so on. Following Goswami (2020), the learner of L2 attempts to alter the system of the L2 to match their L1. Noviyenty and Putri (2020) further note that the extent to which L1 can influence L2 is dependent on the level of control the learner has over L2.

Akindele and Adegbite (2005) recognise two types of interference: proactive and retroactive interference. Proactive interference, which is also referred to as positive transfer, occurs when the mother tongue aids the acquisition of the target language. On the contrary, retroactive interference, also known as negative transfer, hinders the learning process of the second language. In other words, while positive transfer facilitates the learning process of L2, negative transfer impedes it (Goswami, 2020).

Features of NE Segmental Phonology

While most L2 speakers of English have mastered the syntax and semantics of the language, the phonological aspect remains a challenge to them (Olajide and Olaniyi, 2023). Following (Okhuosi, 2018), the phonemes that do not exist in Nigerian languages are usually problematic to Nigerian ESL speakers. The convergent and divergent points of BE and NE phonemes are captured in Table.



1. Table 1: SBE Phonemes and their NE Equivalent

<i>Consonant Sounds</i>																								
SB E	p	b	t	d	k	g	f	v	ə	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ	tʃ	dʒ	m	n	ŋ	l	r	w	j	
NE	p	b	ṭ	d	k	g	f	f, p	t	d	s	ʒ	ʒ	ʃ	ʃ̂	dʒ	m	n	n, m	l	r	w	j	
<i>Vowel Sounds</i>																								
SB E	i:	ɪ	e	æ	a:	ɒ	ɔ:	ʊ	u:	ʌ	ɜ:	ə	eɪ	aɪ	ɔɪ	əʊ	aʊ	ɪə	eə	uə				
NE	I	i	ɛ	a	a	ɔ	ɔ	u	U	ɔ	ɔ	a	x	aɪ	ɔɪ	x	au	ɪə	x	X				

SBE- Standard British English**NE – Nigerian English****x – no equivalent phoneme**

Adapted from Olajide and Olaniyi (2013)

The features of NE phonemes as identified by scholars such as Atoye et al. (2018); Eze and Igwenyi, (2016) Olajide and Olaniyi (2013); Tiffen (1974) are enumerated below:

1. The monophthongisation of diphthongs and triphthongs, e.g. make /meɪk/ pronounced as [m*ek]
2. Reduced vowel system, e.g. sit /sɪt/ and seat /si:t/ pronounced as [sɪt]
3. Devoicing of word final consonants, e.g. was /wɒz/ pronounced as [wɒs]
4. The substitution of dental fricatives, /θ/ and /ð/ with alveolar plosives, /t/ and /d/
5. Absence of post-alveolar affricates, /tʃ/ and /dʒ/
6. Substitution of mid vowels, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/ and /ə/ with [ɒ], [ɔ] and [a] respectively
7. The insertion of vowels to break up consonant clusters (epenthesis) e.g. bible /baɪbl/ pronounced as [baɪbul]
8. The wrong realisation of plural and past tense morphemes, e.g. /kɪkt/ pronounced as [kɪkd]

Methodology**Theoretical Consideration**

The paper adapts Error Analysis Theory as reviewed by Al-Khresheh (2016). He defines Error Analysis as a theory in applied linguistics that examines, analyses and classifies L2 learners' errors. EA identifies two main sources of error: interlingual and intralingual interference. Interlingual errors occur as a result of a negative transfer of the linguistic pattern of the mother tongue or native language to the target language while intralingual errors are caused by the effect of the target language. Errors are categorised into four: omission, selection, addition and



misordering of elements. Omission occurs when a required item is left out of an utterance; Selection involves choosing an incorrect element, in other words, substituting a correct element with a wrong one; Addition entails the insertion of unnecessary element and misordering occurs when an item is wrongly placed (Ellis, 1997 in Al-Khresheh, 2016). Error can occur at different linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, lexis and syntax. Some examples are given below.

1. Omission

- a. Morphological Omission: *He slap her in the morning (omission of 'ed')
- b. Lexical omission: *There is book on the table (omission of article 'a' which ought to precede 'book')

2. Addition

- a. Phonological Addition: womb pronounced as [wumb] instead of /wu:m/ (addition of /b/)
- b. Morphological Addition: *Shocker absorber (addition of "er" to "shock")
- c. Lexical Addition: Fetch the water down (addition of "down")
- d. Syntactic Addition: *The Lagos (addition of "the")

3. Selection

Lexical Selection: *They don't hear English (selection of "hear" instead of "understand")

4. Misordering

- a. Phonological Misordering: ask pronounced as [æks] instead of /æsk/
- b. Lexical Misordering: *Plate number instead of "number plate"
- c. Syntactic Misordering: This my bag is too dirty instaed of "This bag of mine..."

For the purpose of this study, "error of omission" will be referred to as "deletion" and "error of election" will be termed "substitution".

Procedure for Data Collection

Thirty WhatsApp text messages with homophonic errors were randomly selected for the study.

Analysis of Data

Both BE and NE homophonic errors were analysed with Error Analysis Theory as reviewed by Al-Khresheh (2016). The errors were categorized into three: substitution, deletion and addition.



Table 2: Categorisation of Homophonic Errors

S/N	Homophonic Error	No of lexical items	Percentage (%)
<i>BE Homophones</i>			
1	Substitution	12	40
<i>NE Homophones</i>			
2	Substitution	15	50
3	Deletion	1	3.3
4	Addition	2	6.6
Total		30	100

As revealed in Table 2, 40% of the identified homophonic errors are BE homophones, which are categorized under substitution error. The NE homophones are classified into three: substitution of sound, which is 50%; deletion of sound, which is 3.3% and addition of sound, which is 6.6%.

Table 3: BE Homophonic Errors

S/N	Identified Sentence	Erroneous Word	Homophonic variant	RP	Correct form
1	Am sorry	Am	I'm	/æm/	I'm sorry
2	...there is nothing amiss with what the ladies mother did	Ladies	Lady's	/leɪdɪz/	...there is nothing amiss with what the lady's mother did
3	Its been funny	Its	It's	/ɪts/	It's been funny
4	Whose the lucky guy?	Whose	Who's	/hu:z/	Who's the lucky guy?
5	Lets come in now for History.	Lets	Let's	/lets/	Let's come in now for History.
6	They do it because they think their	Their	They're	/ðeə/	They do it because they



	smart				think they're smart
7	Inform of another letter?	Inform	In form	/ɪnfɔ:m/	In form of another letter?
8	As each day goes bye	Bye	By	/baɪ/	As each day goes by
9	She is not aloud to go outdoors	Aloud	Allowed	/əlaʊd/	She is not allowed to go outdoors
10	Father brake every chain	brake	break	/breɪk/	Father break every chain
11	I can't here you	Here	Hear	/hɪə/	I can't hear you
12	Guy, is Philip hear?	Hear	Here	/hɪə/	Guy, is Philip here?

The substitution of the appropriate words with their homophonic variants brought about orthographic and graphological errors in the sentences. In British English, a verb cannot begin a declarative sentence but such is the case in sentence 1 where “I’m” (the contracted form of “I am”) was substituted with “am” (a be verb). The non-use of the apostrophe brought about the orthographic inaccuracy in sentences 2-6. In sentence 2, the plural form of “lady” (ladies) was used instead of the singular form with apostrophe s, “lady’s”; the possessive form of “it” was used in lieu of the contracted form of “it is” in sentence 3; the interrogative adjective, “whose” substituted “who’s”, the contracted form of “who is” in sentence 4; the singular form of “let” (lets) in sentence 5 substituted the contracted form of “let us” (let’s) and in sentence 6, the possessive adjective, “their” was used in the place of the contracted form of “they are” (they’re).

The graphological error in sentence 7 (the spacing of inform) has a semantic implication on the sentence. Hence, in sentence 7, “in the form of something” (in form) was insinuated instead of “to tell”. In sentences 8-10, “bye” (farewell) was selected instead of “by” (next to); “aloud” (with a loud voice) instead of “allowed” (permitted) and “brake” (a device) in lieu of “break” (to split). In sentences 11 and 12, “here” (adverb of location) and “hear” (to perceive sound audibly) were used interchangeably.



Table 4: NE Homophonic Errors of Selection

S/N	Identified Sentence	Erroneous Word	RP	NE Trans	Pseudo homophone	RP	NE Trans	Correct form
13	Let ladders that we're difficult to climb become easy for you to climb	We're	/wiə/	[wiə]	Were	/weə/	[wiə]	Let ladders that were difficult to climb...
14	once you torch currencies and coin...	Torch	/tɔ:ʃ/	[tɔʃ]	touch	/tʌʃ/	[tɔʃ]	Once you touch currencies and coin...
15	I can fill the business flourishing to a greater height.	Fill	/fil/	[fil]	feel	/fi:l/	[fil]	I can feel the business flourishing to a greater height.
16	Please chart me up	Chart	/ʃa:t/	[ʃæt]	chat	/ʃæt/	[ʃæt]	Please chat me up.
17	God should deliver the family from ancestral courses	Courses	/kɔ:sɪz/	[kɔsɪs]	curses	/kɜ:sɪz/	[kɔsɪs]	God should deliver the family from ancestral curses
18	Ogun state has been taking from us	Taking	/teɪkɪŋ/	[t*ekɪn]	taken	/teɪkʰn/	[t*ekɪn]	Ogun State has been taken from us
19	Now that they cut him, what is next?	Cut	/kʌt/	[kɔt]	caught	/kɔ:t/	[kɔt]	Now that they caught him, what is next?
20	For are husband to repent, the mother-in-law	Are	/a:/	[æ]	her	/hɜ:/	[æ]	For her husband to repent, the



	should forgive him							mother-in-law should forgive him
21	Remember that you cannot full all the people every time	Full	/ful/	[ful]	fool	/fu:l/	[ful]	Remember that you cannot fool all the people
22	You where making sense	Where	/wɪə/	[wɪə]	Were	/wɜ:z/	[wɪə]	You were making sense
23	Lead and will follow	Will	/wɪl/	[wɪl]	We'll	/wi:l/	[wɪl]	Lead and we'll follow
24	Can we give them to?	To	/tu/	[tu]	Too	/tu:z/	[tu]	Can we give them too?
25	My own ball is not tick enough	Tick	/tik/	[tik]	thick	/θɪk/	[tik]	My own ball is not thick enough
26	Both women had lived in peace since we parked in	Parked	/pa:kt/	[pæk d]	Packed	/pækt/	[pæk d]	Both women had lived in peace since we packed in
27	I packed to reply your message	Packed	/pækt/	[pæk d]	Parked	/pa:kt/	[pæk d]	I parked to reply your message

Nigerian ESL speakers select the sounds present in their repertoire to substitute those peculiar to BE (Atoye *et al.*, 2018). As presented in Table 4, Nigerian ESL speakers pronounce we're /wɪə/ (the contracted form of “we are”) and were /weə/ (a be verb) as [wɪə]; torch /tɔ:ʃ/ (an object used for illumination) and touch /tʌʃ/ (to come in contact with someone or something) as [tɔʃ]; fill /fɪl/ (to occupy completely) and feel /fi:l/ (to sense something) as [fɪl]; chart /ʃa:t/ (a map or graph) and chat /ʃæt/ (an informal discussion) as [ʃæt]; courses /kɔ:sɪz/ (learning programmes) and curses /kɜ:sɪz/ (a prayer of harm placed on someone) as [kɜ:sɪs]; taking /teɪkɪŋ/ (progressive form of take) and taken /teɪkən/ (perfective form of take) as [t*ekɪn]; cut /kʌt/ (to divide) and



caught /kɔ:t/ (past tense of catch) as [kɒt]; are /a:/ (a be verb) and her /hɜ:/ (accusative form of “she”) as /æ/; full /ful/ (filled up) and fool /fu:l/ (not wise) as /ful/; where /wɪə/ (interrogative pronoun) and were /wɜ:/ (a be verb) as /wɪə/; will /wɪl/ (a modal verb used to express willingness) and we’ll /wi:l/ (contracted form of “we will”) as [wɪl]; to /tu/ (a preposition that shows direction) and too /tu:/ (also) as /tu/; tick /tɪk/ (a parasite) and thick /θɪk/ (**not slim**) as [tɪk]; you /ju:/ (second person pronoun) and you’re /juə/ (the contracted form of “you are”) as [ju]; packed /pækt/ (filled with something) and parked /pa:kt/ (temporarily bringing a vehicle to a halt) as [pækd]. This mispronunciation accounts for the homophonic errors in Nigerian ESL speakers’ written discourse.

Table 5: NE Homophonic Errors of Omission

S/N	Identified Sentences	Erroneous Words	RP	NE Trans	Pseudo-homophone	RP	NE Trans	Correct form
28	I have watched is interview many times	Is	/ɪz/	[ɪs]	his	/hɪz/	[ɪs]	I have watched his interview many times,

As presented in Table 5, there is the omission of letter h and consequently, the glottal sound to alter the speaker’s intended meaning. hence, “is”, a be verb, is made to function as an adjective, which is alien to the English grammar.

Table 6: NE Homophonic Errors of Addition

S/N	Identified Sentences	Erroneous Words	RP	NE Trans	Homophonic variants	RP	NE Trans	Correct form
29	His case his becoming critical	his	/hɪz/	/ɪs/	is	/ɪz/	/ɪs/	His case is becoming critical
30	Have told you	Have	/hæv /	/æv/	I’ve told you	/æv/	/æv/	I’ve told you

In NE, “his” (the possessive form of “he”) and “is” (a be verb) as well as “have” (an auxiliary verb) / “I’ve” (the contracted) are pronounced the same way; thus, the writers’ confusion leading to the erroneous insertion of letter h in their orthographic representation. The orthographic error



in sentence 30 has altered the grammaticality of the sentence for the reason that the structure of a declarative sentence usually begins with a subject and not a verb.

Discussion of Findings

Two broad categories of homophones were identified in this study. They are BE and NE homophones. BE homophones are lexical items that have the same pronunciation in British English while NE homophones are lexical items that do not sound alike in British English but pronounced the same way in Nigerian English. The homophonic errors were further classified into three: Error of substitution, error of deletion and error of addition. The major causes of BE homophonic errors was the non-use of the apostrophe to indicate contraction, mostly erroneously substituted with possessive adjectives and sometimes, the plural form of the lexical item. The NE homophones, on the other hand, were mostly caused by Nigerian ESL speakers' substitution of unfamiliar BE sounds with those that are present in Nigerian languages. This is in tandem with previous findings (Atoye et al., 2018; Eze & Igwenyi, 2016; Olajide & Olaniyi, 2013). Generally, the homophonic errors have serious semantic implication on sentences. This could cause communication breakdown; hence, the need to avoid such errors.

Conclusion

This study has identified BE and NE homophonic errors in the WhatsApp text messages of Nigerian ESL speakers. The identified errors were categorised into three: substitution, deletion and addition. The most recurring error is the error of substitution. Since homophonic errors can alter mutual intelligibility, it is recommended that Nigerian ESL speakers should master how words are pronounced in BBC English and consult the dictionary to differentiate the meaning of confusing words in order for them to be able to use homophones correctly.

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Appendix

S/N	Identified Sentence
1	Am sorry
2	...there is nothing amiss with what the ladies mother did
3	Its been funny
4	Whose the lucky guy?
5	Lets come in now for History.
6	They do it because they think their smart
7	Inform of another letter?
8	As each day goes bye
9	She is not aloud to go outdoors
10	Father brake every chain
11	I can't here you
12	Guy, is Philip hear?
13	Let ladders that we're difficult to climb become easy for you to climb
14	once you torch currencies and coin...
15	I can fill the business flourishing to a greater height.
16	Please chart me up
17	God should deliver the family from ancestral courses
18	Ogun state has been taking from us
19	Now that they cut him, what is next?
20	For are husband to repent, the mother-in-law should forgive him
21	Remember that you cannot full all the people every time
22	You where making sense
23	Lead and will follow
24	Can we give them to?
25	My own ball is not tick enough



26	Both women had lived in peace since we parked in
27	I packed to reply your message
28	I have watched is interview many times
29	His case his becoming critical
30	Have told you

