

FROM DIVERSITY TO CONVERGENCE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF DIALECT LEVELLING AND THE SHAPING OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Nigeria's highly multilingual environment has produced a distinctive form of English shaped through sustained interaction among numerous indigenous linguistic systems. This study investigates dialect levelling in Nigerian English, examining how convergence emerges across phonological, lexical, and syntactic domains through multilingual contact and social interaction. Drawing on spoken and written language data collected from both urban and rural contexts, the study analyses patterns of linguistic variation and reduction across speakers of diverse backgrounds. The analysis demonstrates that urbanisation, education, media diffusion, and social mobility significantly promote convergence, while indigenous languages simultaneously contribute structural influence and cultural continuity. The findings indicate that Nigerian English is not simply a collection of regional variants but an evolving national variety shaped by patterned social processes. The study contributes empirical and theoretical insight into dialect levelling in complex multilingual settings and advances understanding of how postcolonial Englishes stabilise over time.

Keywords: Nigerian English, dialect levelling, multilingualism, language contact, sociolinguistic variation, convergence

Introduction

Nigeria represents one of the most linguistically complex societies in the world, with several hundred languages spoken across

different regions and communities (Crystal, 2000). Within this diverse linguistic ecology, English functions as the principal medium of interethnic communication, administration, education, and national integration. Yet English in Nigeria is far from uniform. Its structure, pronunciation, and usage reflect persistent interaction with indigenous languages, regional histories, and patterns of social mobility (Jowitt, 2005; Ugwuanyi, 2023).

One of the central processes shaping these developments is dialect levelling, a form of language change in which marked differences between varieties are reduced through sustained contact (Trudgill, 1986). Levelling typically arises when speakers of different linguistic backgrounds interact regularly and adjust their speech to maximise intelligibility (Kerswill, 2002). Over time, widely shared or socially dominant features spread, while highly localised or less mutually intelligible forms decline in frequency (Chambers, 2003).

Although dialect levelling has been documented in many parts of the world, its operation within Nigeria presents distinctive characteristics. Unlike settings where levelling occurs among closely related dialects, Nigerian English develops within a context of intense multilingualism, where structurally different language systems interact continuously. Indigenous languages influence pronunciation patterns, lexical choices, and grammatical constructions, even as English serves as the common medium of communication (Aboh, 2023; Oyebola, 2023).

This study examines how dialect levelling operates within Nigerian English and explores the role of indigenous linguistic systems in shaping convergence. It focuses on three principal questions: how convergence appears across different linguistic levels, how indigenous languages influence emerging norms, and which social conditions accelerate or moderate the levelling process. By integrating empirical observation with sociolinguistic theory, the study offers a systematic account of language change in a highly multilingual national environment.

Literature Review

Research on dialect levelling has consistently linked the process to increased contact among speakers. Mobility, urban growth, and expanding social networks bring previously separated linguistic groups into sustained interaction, and speech patterns shift toward forms that facilitate communication across group boundaries (Trudgill, 1986; Chambers, 2003). Features perceived as highly local or socially marked gradually diminish, while widely intelligible forms spread through repeated interaction (Kerswill, 2002).

Studies of English in multilingual societies show that language contact rarely produces simple standardisation. Instead, new varieties emerge through selective mixing, structural adjustment, and innovation (Kachru, 1986). Linguistic forms are retained, modified, or abandoned depending on communicative usefulness, social prestige, and cultural meaning.

Research on Nigerian English has documented extensive influence from indigenous languages. Prosodic patterns often reflect tonal transfer and syllable timing (Oyebola, 2023). Vocabulary includes numerous borrowings that express culturally specific meanings or social relationships (Aboh, 2023). Grammatical constructions sometimes reflect patterns common in local languages, particularly in aspect marking and pragmatic emphasis (Jowitt, 2005). These features demonstrate that Nigerian English is shaped not only by exposure to external models of English but also by ongoing multilingual negotiation (Ugwuanyi, 2023).

However, many descriptive accounts focus primarily on identifying features rather than explaining the mechanisms through which convergence occurs. There remains a need for systematic analysis linking linguistic outcomes to social processes and theoretical models of language change. The present study addresses this need by combining empirical data with an explicitly defined theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary sociolinguistic perspectives that explain how linguistic convergence emerges in contexts of sustained contact.

Socially Structured Variation

Language variation is socially patterned rather than random. Linguistic forms correlate with factors such as age, education, mobility, and interaction networks (Labov, 2001). When individuals participate in broad and diverse social networks, linguistic forms that enable wider communication tend to spread. Convergence therefore reflects the social distribution of linguistic variants and the communicative pressures operating within communities (Chambers, 2003).

Contact-Induced Change and Koine Formation

Sustained interaction among speakers of different linguistic systems produces new varieties through feature selection, simplification, and structural blending (Kerswill, 2002). Some features are retained because they are widely shared or functionally efficient, while others disappear because they are restricted to groups. The resulting variety reflects negotiated linguistic compromise rather than simple borrowing (Trudgill, 1986).

Communicative Adjustment and Identity

Speakers modify their speech in response to social context, often converging toward shared forms to enhance intelligibility while retaining certain features to express identity (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Convergence, therefore, does not eliminate variation entirely but produces a balance between communicative efficiency and social meaning.

Together, these perspectives provide an explanatory framework for understanding how Nigerian English develops through repeated interaction among speakers of different linguistic backgrounds.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a mixed-method sociolinguistic design combining quantitative measurement of linguistic features with qualitative interpretation of usage patterns across social contexts.

Participants

Sixty adult speakers between the ages of eighteen and forty-five participated in the study. Participants were selected to represent diverse linguistic backgrounds and included both urban and rural residents. Variation in educational attainment and occupational mobility was also considered to capture differences in language exposure and interaction patterns.

Data Collection

Language data were collected from structured interviews, naturally occurring conversations, and written materials, including newspapers and digital communication platforms. This combination allowed observation of language use across formal and informal contexts, consistent with sociolinguistic practice in variation research (Labov, 2001).

Analytical Procedure

Linguistic features were identified across phonological, lexical, and syntactic domains. Each feature was coded according to occurrence and distribution across social categories such as residence, education, and interaction context. Quantitative comparison revealed frequency differences, while qualitative analysis examined communicative function and social meaning (Chambers, 2003).

Data Analysis

Phonological Patterns

Analysis revealed systematic reduction of highly localised pronunciation features in contexts involving speakers from different

linguistic backgrounds. Prosodic adjustments were particularly common in urban environments, where speakers regularly interact across ethnic boundaries. These patterns reflect contact-induced restructuring consistent with koineisation processes (Kerswill, 2002).

Lexical Distribution

Vocabulary drawn from indigenous languages showed uneven distribution. Certain terms occurred widely across regions and social groups, functioning as part of a shared national repertoire. Other lexical items remained locally restricted. Widely shared borrowings typically expressed culturally salient concepts, supporting claims that lexical retention is influenced by social meaning and communicative relevance (Aboh, 2023).

Syntactic Usage

Grammatical analysis demonstrated increasing preference for structures that facilitate clarity in interethnic communication. Word order patterns associated with formal English appeared more frequently in contexts involving diverse speakers, particularly in institutional environments. Structural convergence therefore appears context-sensitive rather than uniform (Jowitt, 2005).

Social Distribution

Comparative analysis revealed consistent relationships between linguistic convergence and social variables. Urban speakers exhibited higher rates of shared features than rural speakers. Individuals with greater educational exposure and broader social mobility demonstrated stronger alignment with convergent patterns. These findings align with variationist predictions concerning social network density and language change (Labov, 2001).

Results

The analysis reveals several key findings.

First, convergence operates across multiple linguistic levels simultaneously, confirming that dialect levelling is a systemic process rather than an isolated adjustment (Trudgill, 1986).

Second, interaction density strongly predicts levelling intensity, particularly in urban environments characterised by frequent cross-group communication (Kerswill, 2002).

Third, linguistic change is selective rather than uniform. Features with strong cultural or communicative value persist despite pressure toward standardisation (Aboh, 2023).

Fourth, institutional and technological influences reinforce convergence through the dissemination of widely recognisable forms (Kachru, 1986).

Discussion

The observed patterns demonstrate that dialect levelling in Nigerian English is closely linked to social organisation and patterns of interaction. Increased mobility and urban concentration create conditions in which communicative efficiency becomes essential, encouraging the adoption of shared forms (Chambers, 2003).

At the same time, multilingual contact produces outcomes that differ from simple standardisation. Indigenous linguistic influence remains visible in prosodic patterns, lexical choice, and pragmatic expression. Rather than disappearing, these elements become integrated into the emerging variety, contributing to its distinctiveness (Ugwuanyi, 2023).

The coexistence of convergence and retention reflects the dual functions of language as both a communicative tool and a marker of identity, a pattern widely observed in sociolinguistic theory (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Nigerian English, therefore, develops as a negotiated linguistic system shaped by both social integration and identity maintenance.

Conclusion

Dialect levelling in Nigerian English represents an ongoing process of structured convergence driven by multilingual contact, social mobility, and institutional influence. Variation is reorganised rather than eliminated, and shared forms expand across phonological, lexical, and syntactic domains while culturally meaningful features remain embedded within the evolving system.

Nigerian English is thus emerging as a stabilising national variety formed through continuous interaction among diverse linguistic communities. Understanding this development requires attention to both social dynamics and structural linguistic change.

Future research may extend this work through longitudinal analysis, expanded corpora, and investigation of generational differences in language use.

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