Sound alternations and communication effectiveness among certain Igbo-English speakers of Anambra State

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Abstract

The paper examines sound alternations or interchange of sounds in some English words as realized by Igbo-English speakers of some communities in Anambra State. Discussing language acquisition in children, Chomsky (1965:200-201) observes that every normal child is genetically endowed with the language faculty which incorporates grammatical principles of Universal Grammar (UG). These innate universal principles have two functions namely: (a) enable children to acquire language quite successfully even though no special care is taken to teach them and no special attention is given to their progress and (b) constrain the application of every grammatical operation in every language. Despite the genetic endowment of humans with language faculty, the linguistic performance in English of some Igbo native speakers wobbles even after series of formal education. The major difficulty of these Igbo-English speakers is in the articulation of some sounds that are positionally interchanged in English words. Sometimes, the interchange causes communicative barriers as it produces a different meaning to the intended meaning of the speaker. This paper highlights the occurrence of the sound alternations in English words and discusses the resultant communicative barrier of the phenomenon, also referred to as interference. Various samples of words containing the alternated sounds are produced; each speaker's actualizations of the words are placed side by side with his intended realizations of the same words. Evidence from the analyses of the word samples shows that the interlocutor is often misled and deceived when he/she relies completely on the actual realizations of the locutor.

1. Introduction

Alternation is a linguistic term that refers to the relationship which exists between the alternative forms or variants of a linguistic unit. This paper uses the term *sound alternation* to describe a situation of articulatory error where an English sound is substituted for/interchanged with another in a word. For instance, an Igbo-English speaker wishing to say 'load' rather realizes 'road'. For lorry, lead/leader, he/she realizes rolly, read/reader respectively. This is a linguistic anomaly and can lead to misinformation and distortion of the intended message. The above anomaly is particularly attested to in some communities around Awka, Ihiala and Nnewi Local Government Areas of Anambra State but it is not restricted to those areas. The phenomenon is also observed in many other parts of the State but in lesser degree.

It may however be pertinent to remark that the articulatory error is not peculiar to Igbo-English speakers only. Many other Nigerian language speakers commit different articulatory errors when they pronounce or articulate English words. The type of error varies from language to language and each language group has its own particular sound/sounds that is/are wrongly articulated by speakers in the course of communication. The Igbo-English speaker may for instance substitute [l] for[r] and vice versa. The Hausa-English speaker may not necessarily interchange [l] and [r] but can interchange [p] and[f] and [f] for [p]. In place of [f], the speaker realizes an occlusive bilabial sound [p]. Conversely, in situations where the speaker means to pronounce the sound [p], the attempt results in the production of [f] and vice versa as is seen in the pronunciation of the following words:

- Carfenter instead of carpenter

    Faint instead of paint
- Fear instead of pear

- Peet instead of feet

Similarly, speakers of some dialects of Yoruba articulate with great difficulty the affricate sound [ʧ] which they realize as [s]. For instance, a Yoruba-English speaker realizes 'sance' instead of chance and sif instead of chief.

An Urhobo-English speaker replaces [l] with [n] when he/she articulates *Nondon* instead of*London* while an Ibibio/Efik-English speaker substitutes [j] for[ʤ] where he/she realizes *Yoseph* instead of *Joseph* and *yonction* instead of *junction.* Our interest, however, is not to investigate the errors in English pronunciation by different Nigerian language groups, but to discuss, with ample examples, the interchange of sounds in the articulation of English words by Igbo speakers living around Awka, Ihiala, Ozubulu, Ojoto and Ichi all in Anambra State, Nigeria.

It is pertinent to mention that this articulation anomaly cuts across the speech forms of adults and children especially the semi-educated and illiterate. Many secondary school students are victims of this wrong pronunciation. A number of graduates and even postgraduates students are also involved in this anomaly. The discussion of such sound alternations will reveal, to some extent, the level/degree of communicative effectiveness of such speakers and also help to determine whether those alternations constitute communicative barriers or suggest a language disorder.

Proper articulation of sounds is essential for effective communication. Articulatory errors bring about misinterpretation of the message among communicating partners. Nigerian language speakers of English are confronted with the problem of articulatory errors with the result that most of the times, the intended message is not what is received. Almost every ethnic group in Nigeria has a peculiar sound or sounds that pose problems to native speakers when they speak in the English language. This paper therefore examines the Igbo-English speakers of selected areas of Anambra State and their articulation of [l] and [r] in discourse.

The objectives of the paper are to discuss the interchange of sounds in the articulation of English words by some Igbo speakers; examine the different articulatory errors in the speech forms of certain Igbo speakers; discuss the communicative effectiveness of the message. Only areas around Awka, Ihiala and Nnewi Local Government Areas will be considered in the collection of data. Data in form of lexical items and phrases are elicited from native speakers (both literate and illiterate) of Igbo extraction from the concerned local government areas of the State.

2. Literature review

Crystal (1997:1b) defines alternation as a term used in linguistics to refer to the relationship which exists between the alternative forms or variants of a linguistic unit. He describes communication as the transmission and reception of information (a message) between a source and a receiver using a signaling system. In linguistic contexts, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is a language, and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance. In his discussion of generative phonology, Agbedo (2015:60-1) observes that the distinguishing character of post-structuralist theory of phonology is its attention not simply to surface contrasts but also to patterns of alternation in shape, and its positing of an abstract underlying representation (where contrasts among elements are characterized) that is related to surface phonetic form by a system of rewriting rules. Mackey (1965:107) observes that every learner of a second language is faced with many obstacles. One of such obstacles is the conflict of the structure of the native language with the second language.

Mackey (1965:107) observes that every learner of a second language is faced with many obstacles. One of such obstacles is the conflict of the structure of the native language with the second language. He states thus:

> A person who has been using only one language since early childhood has habits of thought which are closely tied to his habits of language. The language he uses is now part of his experience with a world of actions and things. When he was a child, an increase in this experience was always connected with an increase in language learning.

What we extract from the above is that the mother tongue has an important role to play in second language learning. It has always been said that the mother tongue conditions the articulatory organs of individual language speakers. This explains to some extent why some language learners find it more difficult than others pronouncing *foreign* sounds during second language learning. The difficulty increases when certain sounds that are encountered in the second language are absent in the mother tongue or the first languageas the case may be. The lacuna (absence of certain sounds in the first language) explains why some second language learners/speakers never succeed in articulating certain sounds no matter how much they labour to surmount the problems.

In the case of the Igbo-English speakers and the articulation of [l] and [r], the question of the absence of the sounds in the first language does not arise because the sounds[l] and [r] are phonemes/distinctive units in the Igbo sound system.

3. Data presentation and analysis

In what follows, we shall present some English words containing [l] and [r] sounds and expose the pronunciation of these words by some Igbo-English speakers from the areas cited earlier. We shall take note of these phonemes in the words in the initial median and final positions. The process will be taken in two stages: first, sentences containing these sounds will be generated showing the affected sounds in italics. Secondly, a summary of the interchanged sounds will be tabulated in an organized form so that one can at a glance identify the problem. This will enable us to determine whether the alternation of the sounds is as a result of the position of the [l] and [r] sounds in the words or not.

The following are some examples of sentences showing the realizations of [l] and [r] sounds in context by the said speakers.

i. A lorry is running along the road realized as[*rolly* is *lunning arong* the *load]*
ii. Jesus is my Lord and king realized as[*Jesus is my rod and king*].
ii. The big rat ran into the hole realized as [*the big lat lan into the hole*].
iv.We shall eat rice tomorrow realized as[*we shall eat lice tomorrow*].
v. Rome was not built in a day realized as [*Lomewas not built in a day*].
vi. Rap the parcel for the customer realized as *[Lap* the parcel for the customer].
vii. The rubber bucket is broken realized as [the *lubber* bucket is *bloken*]
viii. The room is very airy realized as [the *loomvely* aily].
ix. My brother is in the room realized as [my*blother* is in the loom].
x. Her sister has gone to buy bread realized as [her sister has gone to buy *bled*].
xi. The bridegroom put the ring on the finger of the bride realized as [the*blidegloom* put the ling on the finger of the*blide*].
xii. Let each person carry his/her crossrealized as [let each person *caly* his/her *clos]*.
xiii. The situation in Nigeria is horrible realized as[the situation in Nigeria is *hollible]*.
xiv. We are sorry for wasting your time realized as [we are *solly* for wasting your time].
xv. His Royal highness is sitting on his throne realized as [His *Loyal* Highness is seated on his *thlone*].

A table of the interchanged sounds arranged according to their position of occurrence: initial position, median position and final position.

[r] Initial / [l] Initial	[l] Middle / [r] Middle	[l] Final / [r] Final
road → load room → loom rod → od Rice → Lice Rat → Lat Right → Light Rude → Lude Love → Rove Rubber → Lobber Rope → Lope Ring → Ling Run → Lun Royal → Loyal Rome → Lome	lorry → rolly cross → closs bread → blead brown → blown brother → blother Mary → Maly sorry → s olly story → stoly horrible → hollible glory → gloly carry → cally	The sounds are well articulated in the final position when in isolation but when followed by another wordthe same error results. For instance the following articulations are elicited from Igbo-English speakers in question : Forever → folever Forerunner → folunner For instance → folinstance Pray for us → play forlus Four of us → folofus

From the above table, it is observed that [l] and [r] sounds in the final position are well pronounced by thespeakers only in isolation but in combinations, the same errors are observed. For example: the Igbo-English speaker can pronounce ball, tall, fall, parcel etc. perfectly well in isolation but when these are followed by another word, the mispronunciation results. At the initial position, [l] and [r] are almost always interchanged by the speakers as observed in the following words:
Run realized as lun
Rubber realized as lubber
Love realized as rove
Lorry realized as rolly
Rope realized as lope etc.

From the data presented above, it is observed that the sound alternation can cause a serious barrier to communication because the communicative partner/listener is completely confused particularly if he/she is a stranger in the community where such sound alternations are constant. For instance, one can imagine how a foreigner might interpret the following utterances:

A reading from the first letter of St. Paul to the Romans realized as [*A leading flom the first letter of St Paul to the Lomans*).

My Lord realized as [*My Rod*]

The leader is in the room realized as [*The reader is in the loom*].

The information in the above messages is greatly distorted as the listener will understand complete opposite of what is intended by the informant thereby showing ineffective communication.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, we have tried to examine sound alternations of [l] and [r] in utterances of Igbo-English speakers in some parts/communities of Anambra State. We posit that the deformation of English words by the alternation of [l] and [r]sounds may occur in all the contexts namely at word initial, median, and final positions. This phenomenon of sound alternation among some Igbo speakers of the English language can occur among both the literate and illiterate speakers but it is more pronounced among the illiterate and semiliterate speakers. The well educated speakers are not excluded from this language problem but they make a lot of conscious effort to minimize it to a large extent.

From a pedagogical point of view, we suggest that at the nursery, primary, and secondary school levels, teachers should be very attentive in detetcting this problem of sound alternation among students and create appropriate sound drills to correct it. This will no doubt help the children overcome speech problems in later life. Local school authorities should be aware of the existence of this problem and organize language workshops for the teachers from time to time.

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