West African English in Digital Discourse

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Abstract

This paper applies sociolinguistic and discourse-analytical approaches to examine the features of West African English (WAE) in digital discourse. Data comprises 23,374 posts and responses from some popular social and political online forums hosted by Nigerians (i.e. *Nairaland* and *Naijapals*); Ghanaians (i.e. *Ghanaforum.com*), and Sierra Leoneans (i.e. Sierra *Online club* and *Sierra Leone Forum*). These digital forums have served as social media platforms for discussions and debates on, and responses to recent socio-political events in those countries. Findings show that three varieties of WAE are evident in online discourse namely, the acrolect (high), mesolect (middle), and basilect (low), which sometimes depend on the educational level of the users. The local pidgin is also frequently used especially in the Nigerian forums. These varieties in turn reflect features that are characteristic of WAE such as (i) loan words within the standard (acrolect) variety (ii) code-switching between the standard variety and pidgin/Krio (iii) evidence of deviants/errors characteristic of the basilect variety and (iv) linguistic creativity such as coinages, and the language style of the Internet. Findings further show that West African online communicators in English have adapted their socio-cultural nuances of language use to modern information technology.

Key Words: West African English, digital discourse, online forums, language use, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone.

1. Introduction: West African English

Language is sensitive to its environment; thus it reflects the social and cultural norms of its users. English like other languages used on the Internet not only reflects the cultural language habits of its users but also demonstrates features that are unique to geographical spaces/places. This can be attributed to the localization process that English has had to go through across countries and regions of the world. This paper examines features that are characteristically West African and how these are reflected in online discourse. Some of these features are common to other new Englishes. Awonusi (2010) argues that the recognition of regional varieties ought to be given a significant focus in the study of varieties of English, possibly ahead of sub-regional and national varieties. His argument probably stems from the assumption that some previous studies had provided sufficient evidence in recognition of continental and regional Englishes with some recognizable and defining characteristics associated with for example, Caribbean English, Asian English or African English. (See Wells, 1982; Awonusi 1987; 2010). Spencer (1971:7) had earlier suggested that indeed 'West African English' exists judging from some

unmistakable 'indelible marks on certain varieties of spoken and written English,' (cited in Awonusi, 2010:4). Some further studies not only supported this finding, but also attempted to characterized West African English (henceforth WAE) (e.g. Angogo and Hancock, 1980; Trudgill and Hannah, 1985; Schmied, 1991). Although Simo Bobda (1995) cautioning against some possible over-generalizations, he also makes a case for WAE by identifying some phonological resemblances between Nigerian English (NigE) and Cameroonian English (CamE). Certain other common phonological features such as (i) general absence of dental fricatives (ii) cluster reduction processes, especially those involving stops and fricatives (iii) deletion of certain word-final consonant (like in 'mus' for 'must') (iv) the merger of *let* and *late* etc. are also identified in Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean English (Awonusi, 2010; Gyasi, 1990; Ahulu, 1994).

Anglophone West African countries (e.g. Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone - the focus of this study) have some similar socio-cultural and linguistic history. This perhaps informs Awonusi's coinage: 'Nigerleone' (a blend of Nigeria and Sierra Leone) to represent 'extensive evidence in support of Englishization of indigenous languages and consequent nativization of English' (2010:7).

> It must be pointed out that Nigeria and Sierra Leone have a lot in common right from colonial history apart from having a common exoglossic language. Besides, there was greater political interaction through the deployment of a Nigerian intervention force in Sierra Leone during the Sierra Leone civil war years in the

1990s. After the abolition of the slave trade, a number of freed slaves who were believed to be of Nigerian origin, particularly of the Yoruba stock of Western Nigeria, returned and settled in Freetown... A number of the former slaves who were speakers of Sierra Leone Creole came to Nigeria as part of the early set of missionary-teachers in Western Nigeria (see Adetugbo, 1979; Jibril, 1985; Awonusi, 1993). It is even claimed that Yoruba is spoken in pockets of Sierra Leone and *The Oxford Companion of the English Language* (1992) identifies Yoruba as one of the source languages of Sierra Leone Creole (Awonusi 2010:7).

Similarly, Ghana and Nigeria are not only neighbours with common regional boundaries, but also have some common socio-cultural histories. For instance, both were colonized by Britain and constantly maintain socio-economic and cultural interactions through trade contacts, social/business relationships, and inter-marriages. Many Nigerians live in Ghana and vice versa, and some Nigerian languages (e.g. Hausa and Yoruba) are said to be spoken in some parts of Ghana. Hausa for example is spoken in northern Ghana as well as in Accra (Newman, 2000). Thus, Nigerians and Ghanaians have similar socio-cultural and linguistic history.

2. Objectives of study

West African English (WAE), which in this study represents Nigerian English (NigE),

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Ghanaian English (GhaE), and Sierra Leonean English (SLEng), is noticeable in online discourse environments. As African users of English from different educational levels and backgrounds grapple with communication in the social media of the Internet, it is important to investigate what may be regarded as 'West African English in digital discourse' to establish whether there have been new developments in the use of English in West Africa since the earlier studies (e.g. Spencer, 1971), particularly on the Internet. Interestingly, the so-called 'internet English' with generic styles that are unique to the Internet and mobile telephony (Crystal, 2006) increasingly influences and indeed, guides how online interactants compose textual data in the social media. This study adopts a sociolinguistic-discourse approach to attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

  (i)   What are the main features of West African English (WAE) (i.e. NigE, GhaE and SLEng)?
  (ii) How does WAE manifest in some popular social/political blogs on recent events in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone?
  (iii) What constraints do the new media technologies place on WAE?
  (iv) What is the future of WAE in the face of the new information technologies

3. Lexico-Semantic and Syntactic Features of West African English

Arguably, WAE is still in the process of being entirely indigenized. Certain features resulting from the process of indigenization/domestication have been identified and extensively discussed by West African scholars (cf. Adetugbo 1977; Adegbija, 1989; 2004; Gyasi, 1990; Ahulu, 1994; Conteh-Morgan, 1997). These features are marked by new words and expressions that reflect new ways of perceiving and constructing the host environment. They include (i) insertion within sentences of lexical items with local colorations (i.e. coinages/loan words) (ii) inclusion of local idioms (iii) hybridization (i.e. combination of a word or sense of a word in English with that in the indigenous language (Adegbija 2004) e.g. yellow fever for traffic wardens (iv) direct translation/transliteration of the indigenous language (v) semantic extensions and culture bound expressions, which at the level of pragmatics are identified as inevitable in modern WAE (e.g. 'eat money' for 'spend money') (Conteh-Morgan, 1997). The reasons for these are not farfetched. As pointed out earlier, English like any other language is inherently culture sensitive and with its constant contact with local languages is bound to respond to the features of these languages. Again indigenization or nativization of a language demands the integration of the features of that language into the culture of the host society or the integration of the cultures of the society into the system of the foreign language (Adamo 2007).

Apart from natural contact, English was deliberately and consciously imposed on some West African societies as a matter of colonial policy and in the process, learners of English forced (and still force) certain nuances and peculiar local expressions into English. This resulted in the emergence of varieties of the WAE, which according to Banjo (1996) is attributable to individuals' level of education; hence, he identifies three basic varieties (i) English spoken by semi-illiterate people and those with elementary education; this is characterized by transfers

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from the mother tongue and lacks international intelligibility (ii) English spoken by secondary school leavers; this is passable English with both national and international intelligibility (iii) English spoken by university graduates that is close to the British English and carries higher international acceptance but locally criticized as fake or *sheun-shuen* in Sierra Leone (Conteh-Morgan, 1997). This is equivalent to the typology of the basilect (low); the mesolect (middle); and the acrolect (high) varieties. Conteh-Morgan adds a fourth level – the 'quasi-British English,' in Sierra Leone, which is 'characterised by closeness to Standard British in syntax and semantics, but with differences in phonetic features and discoursal strategies' (1997:54). Some Nigerian scholars have established the existence of standard and non-standard Nigeria English varieties (e.g. Ubahakwe 1979; Bamiro, 1991); However, Okoro (1986) argues that there is merely the existence of two distinct varieties of the same variety, i.e. standard and non-standard which vary on the basis of education, status and social exposure of the users (cf. Chiluwa, 2010a). The non-standard variety of NigE is a mixture of English and the Nigerian pidgin. Standard/educated NigE on the other hand shares common grammatical 'core features' with British and American English (Jibril 1982). They also exhibit lexical items with local 'colorations,' i.e. elements with peculiar Nigerian expressions and those with local Nigerian 'flavour' (Awonusi 1987; Adegbija, 1989).

At the syntactic level, some WAE varieties (e.g. Nigerian) are often rigid in terms of length of sentences for rhythmic or stylistic effects. So they lack flexibility and are characteristically bookish (Egbe, 1984). Features of these varieties include: the pluralization of some non-count nouns; omission of articles/determiners (e.g.,

some/any), unusual use of prepositions (e.g. the choice of 'for' where 'of' or 'by' is the British norm), the use of some transitive verbs intransitively (Dadzie, 2004); the use of culture-specific vocabulary items, semantic shift, and some local language induced structures (see also Gyasi 1990 for examples from Ghana). According to Jowitt (1991), category shifts such as reclassification of grammatical categories, insertion of categories and deliberate omissions of some items are some of the features of NigE or WAE grammar; spelling pronunciation, the substitution of the local language vowels and consonants for English ones; replacement of stress by tone stress shifts or localization of stress/tones are other features of its phonology. These variations or 'errors' are due to 'over-generalization' and mother-tongue interference, that deviate considerably from the Standard British English (SBE) (Chiluwa, 2010a).

4. Structure of English on the Internet

The structure of written English on the Internet appears unstable due to styles that are linked with computer-mediated communication (CMC). Hence, 'Internet English' combines features that are both standard and non-standard varieties. According to Herring (2001), the structure of computer-mediated English (CME) is less standard, less complex and less coherent than standard written language (English). Crystal (2006:244) further argues that the language style of the web is difficult to describe because it 'falls uneasily between standard and non-standard English.' Some of the samples however illustrate writings that are largely orthodox in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar but they 'depart from the norm in various ways'. And while 'discourse expresses a sequence of

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units of thought,' they still 'do not correspond to the kinds of sentence division we...associate with elegant writing.' 'At lower levels of grammar, there are features which would be considered unacceptable in traditional printed publications... (244-5).

Crystal (2011) concludes that Internet language combines features of speech exchanges and written communication. For instance, many words and constructions are characteristic of short forms, as well as lengthy coordinated sentences. There are also 'nonsense vocabulary,' obscenity, and slang. Online writing displays different characteristics such as multiple instances of subordination, elaborately balanced syntactic patterns and items of vocabulary that are never spoken, (e.g. names of chemical compounds) (2011:18). Unconventional orthography also results when textual representation of auditory information such as prosody, laughter and other non-language sounds becomes necessary (Herring 2001). In some cases emoticons (e.g. smiley face) are used to express emotions. Herring argues that only a relatively small percentage of non-standard linguistic features in CMD are intentional, rather the majority are deliberate choices made by users in order to economize space, mimic spoken language features or express themselves creatively (p.5). While treal time synchronous medium (i.e. IRC) tends to be more unpredictable, due to the fact that it more frequently illustrates features of oral language, text-based asynchronous CMD (e.g. emails, blogs or discussion forums) enables users to take their time to construct and edit their messages. As Herring (2001)

also observes, variation in structural complexity in emails, blogs or discussion forums must be understood as reflecting social situational factors, which determine what level of formality (and with it standardness) and structural complexity that is appropriate to the context. Unlike email however, language forms in blogs and discussion forums are less complex and combine features of both written and spoken language. Chiluwa (2011) for example, shows that Nigerian participants in an online political discussion forum reflects various level of English language proficiency and that language variations are much more based on linguistic choices of the participants rather than on English language proficiency.

5. West African English on the Internet

Studies of the evidences of WAE on the Internet are almost non-existent. The only study that attempted to document African online behaviours is Taiwo and Chiluwa, (2012). The volume comprises discourse-analytical studies of social interactions on different social media platforms vis-a-vis the traditional norms and communicative cultures of the interactants.

However, there have been a few studies on the manifestations of NigE in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which document evidence of the presence of some definite features of both the standard and non-standard varieties of NigE in text-messages (Chiluwa, 2008; 2010b; Taiwo, 2008); informal email messages (Chiluwa, 2010a), blogs and bulletin boards (Ifukor, 2011a) written by Nigerians. This 'Nigerianness' of text-based online

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communications has also reflected the 'discursive practice and the Nigerian identity' on the Internet (Chiluwa, 2010b). For instance, at the lexical and phonological levels, Ifukor (2011b) identifies evidence of spellings and 'phonological shibboleths' in Nigerian English most of which manifest as elements of transfers from the local languages (e.g. Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa). Chiluwa (2010b) and Ifukor (2010) also show evidence of code-mixing, coinages, loan words and local idioms that are peculiarly Nigerian in both informal email messages and social networking sites written or hosted by Nigerians. The present study is likely one of the first attempts to examine features that are common to WAE in computer-mediated communication (CMC).

6. Methodology

The data for this study comprises 23,378 posts and replies from popular social and political online forums hosted by Nigerians (i.e. *Nairaland forum –www.nairaland.com* and *Naijapals – www.naijapals.com),* by Ghanaians (i.e. www.g*hanaforum.com*) and by Sierra Leoneans (i.e. Sierra Leone online club – *www.leoneclub.org* and *Sierra Leone Forum – www.topix.com/forum/world/sierra-leone*) that have served as social media platforms for discussions, debates and responses to recent socio-political events in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. For example, the recurrent bombings and security challenges in Nigeria; the November 2012 general elections in Sierra Leone; the death of the Ghanaian president and the December, 2012 general elections in Ghana, have attracted widespread discussions and responses. The various online reactions and interactions are most likely to reveal features of localized English in the West African sub-region. As Adroutsopoulos (2011.153) has observed, 'networked writing questions the

adequacy of the feature-based approach and spoken language bias that have dominated conceptions of language change in sociolinguistics'; hence, a sociolinguistic-based CMC should take into cognizance the reality of the CMC discourse context that enables new language forms and reflects 'a change of scale in the volume and publicness of vernacular writing; a diversification of old and new vernacular patterns; an extension of written language repertoires, and a concomitant pluralisation of written language norms.' CMC is a new discourse context in which some of the features of face-to-face interaction have survived and others are modified. So, non Standard English in writing would certainly mean a shift in emphasis away from phonology towards greater attention in spelling, vocabulary and grammar.

A sociolinguistic approach adopted in this study examines some sub-varieties of WAE in their different informal performance modes, within the context of CMC. This method also includes the examination of key notions like code-switching, (online) community, literacy and identities and how they are creatively used to perform some social actions. A discourse dimension examines lexical variations and semantic extensions in their discourse and cultural contexts. Given the limited space of this paper, only a handful of posts are reproduced in the findings and analysis. In the analysis, 'P' represents 'posts'.

7. Findings and Discussions

The main findings of this research show the extent to which features of WAE are reflected on the Internet, especially on the social media. Interestingly, due to the impression that English (i.e. British/American) is the language of the Internet, many African users of the Internet

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are very careful with their English in order to 'act uppity' (Conteh-Morgan, 1997), which of course does not reflect the reality of the different competencies in English by West Africans. Especially in the Sierra Leone forums, apart from very few cases of the mixture of Standard English with Krio and pidgin, most of the interactants wrote in the acrolet variety or the 'Quasi British English.' One of the reasons given by Conteh-Morgan for this is that many Sierra Leoneans believe that English is not a non-native language, so they attempt to write the so-called 'Queens English,' but end up displaying patterns that are peculiarly West African as highlighted above. The same thing happens in the Ghanaian forums; most of the blogs are written in the high variety of English with very little or no replies/responses from the readers. Only a few instances of local expressions, code-switching and pidgin slogans are exemplified in the Ghanaian forum under study. Only the Nigerian forums display a great deal of variations in language use that reflect the character of WAE on the Internet.

In summary, the present study shows that WAE in the social media reflects the following features (i) coinages and loan words within the standard (acrolect) variety (ii) code-switching between the Standard variety and pidgin/Krio (iii) the non-standard (basilect) variety with evidence of deviants/errors (iv) the local pidgin, especially in Nigeria, and (v) linguistic creativity as the language style of the Internet.

7.1 Coinages and Loan Words in Standard WAE on the Internet

Mostly in the NigE and GhaEng data, proper names, titles, local labels, loan words and coinages that lack direct English translations are generally used in their original forms. Certain loan words that are translatable into English but are likely to lose their local thought impact if translated, are still used in their original forms. In Posts 1-10 (below) for example, local labels, proper names, titles, indigenous greeting formulas and loan words are used in the standard variety.

> **P1.** Now this is a matter of concern. What are our lousy leaders doing *bikonu*? And when did the South begin to make up the bulk of the Nigerian military?
> **P2**. Read my posts on other threads carefully, you will think that I am a *woli*. The *Boko haram* pple are just too predictable.
> **P3**. We are now reaping the fruit of what was sown 9 years ago (or thereabout), when *Sharia* law was established in *Zamfara*.
> **P4**. Must u talk on everything u see? Why not save them as *JTF, JTF2* & *JTF3* other than talking like an illiterate...,
> **P5**. I guess you are confused. Your point 1 says *GEJ* created *Boko haram* and your point 2 is

saying that **GEJ** knows the leaders and creators of Boko haram.

P6. **Al Hakubarah** to you all my fellow Nairalanders. Can't you see that this letter is a fabrication by **MASSOB**?

P7. **Mallam Sanni Umaru**. Is that their new leader?? Ah new **wahala**

P8. Wow! **Odikwa egwu**.

P9. **NDC** knows how to win election but cannot govern - **Sekou Nkrumah** He intimated that the ruling party in recent years has proven to have the campaign machinery to effectively win an election but it has been abysmal when it comes to governance.

P10. A member of the **CRC**, **Gabriel Scott Pwamang** explained that **Accra** is congested.

P11. Julius Maada Bio; **Lansana Fadika, SLPP Freetown**, the capital of Sierra Leone, was the scene of a bloody massacre on Saturday as ruthless thugs and gangs hired by Julius Maada Bio, the human rights abuser-turned presidential candidate... (Ahmed M Kamara on January 16, 2012)

P12. **APC** is using all dirty tactics to suppress their leading opponent **SLPP**. Recent by election in western area ward 104 concluded with victory for SLPP candidate, APC waisted no time in instructing their thugs supported by **OSD** officers to go and terrorize the community for not voting for their candidate. God help Sierra Leone, **APC** is craving for trouble!!!!!! (*Jan 15, 2012*)

P13. **inshallah.allah** is on our side we ll beat America in a war .we are stronger than USA. **illilah inshallah subhanallah habibullah** *Pakistani a true muslim

'Bikonu' in P1 for example, is an Igbo word for 'please.' However, the English *please* lacks the cultural discourse function of *bikonu* in this particular context. Where the English 'please' would have appealed to the Boko Haram or the government, bikonu more or less appeals to the general public rather than the radical Islamic sect or the Joint Military Task Force. *Woli* in P2 is a Yoruba word for 'prophet' but is not translated probably because the local word appears to convey more power and prestige than the English 'prophet.' *Wahala* in P7 is another Nigerian (Yoruba) word for 'trouble' but in this context of crisis appears to carry more semantic weight than the usual English trouble. Similarly, *odikwa egwu* in P8 is an exclamation in Igbo, comparable to the English 'it's horrible' usually said in a situation of extreme disgust and fear. But again, the user prefers the meaning conveyed in Igbo because the local meaning combines both horror and fear. *Al Hakubarah* in P6 and *inshallah.allah... illilah inshallah subhanallah habibullah* in P13, are greeting forms and religious slogans in Islam that lack direct English translation that can equal its local flavour and impact. The writer of P13 from Sierra

Leone was reacting to the reports of a US drone attack in Pakistan. Proper names like 'Sharia,' 'Zamfara' 'Sanni Umaru,' 'Accra,' 'Sekou Nkrumah,' 'Freetown,' or a title like 'mallam' and local labels like 'JTF' (Joint Task Force), 'MASSOB' and 'GEJ' (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) and abbreviation for political parties like NDC, CRC, SLPP etc need no translation since they reflect the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the English host communities as evident in the threads. Some forms of coinages such as 'Musatuary' (Musa's obiturary) or 'Bokites' (supporters of Boko Haram) are also noticeable in the Nigerian conversations. The samples of conversation threads below are reactions to online report about the 'Boko Haram planning fresh attack in Nigeria,' and some socio-political events in Ghana and Sierra Leone.

WAE not only reflects lexical and semantic domestication, but also pragmatic or discursive variations. In most of the conversations in the data, it takes the appropriate background knowledge of the socio-cultural (discourse) context of the interactants to be able to interpret the meanings being produced in the threads although the conversations are in English. The samples below (i.e. P14-P19) are reactions to the report of threats issued by a Boko Haram leader on the 9th of August, 2009 published by *Vanguard*, a Nigerian weekly newspaper, and a subsequent bombing of a Catholic church in Madalla, (Nigerian Niger state) on Chrismas day of 2011.

P14. Its time Nigeria broke up. Seriously, what makes these people think they hold the monopoly over violence? We

need to make life miserable for their *brethren* in the SW, *SS* and SE.
P15. Well if the story is true I would advise every southerner in the north to hurry back home. But those guys should know that whatever they do would have implications, let them come *we* shall be ready. I can see an end to Nigeria
P16. *We* have all the oil. *They* know when they let *us* go they will have NOTHING, while the south will take all its oil and put it to good use and move the country forward.
P17. But i still want Nigeria to be one!! Can't we just be happy living in the same borders? i want peace to really come and the north end this sharia nonsense.
P18. Do you realise that there are Yoruba's in some of the states you've placed in the North? *Kwara* and *Kogi* (maybe even FCT) should

be in your south.
P19. The fact *they*
are caught making
bombs is fearful.
P20. *Eii.* So we have Ghanaian
paedophiles? *asem oh*. I thought
we
 just did *Sakawa* stuff..lol
P21. the sakawa part got me
cracking up *LMAOOOOOOOO*
P22. Are you serious *paa?*
P23. I am serious, bro
P24. looool, Akaila *paa*
P25. emom Ghana *paa,* aaahh

Most of the abbreviations, comments and local expressions in the above conversations will make very little sense to anyone who is not familiar with the Nigerian and Ghanaian environments. Someone familiar with Nigeria's religious orientation will understand the choice of 'brethren' rather than 'brothers' used by the writer of P14. Also, the use of SW (south-west), SS (south-south), and SE (south-east) in the same thread might be confusing to a novice to Nigeria's geo-political and ethnic differences. Especially 'south-south' is not common in British or American English, which in the Nigerian context represents a geo-political zone carved out of the former eastern, western and mid-western regions of Nigeria. The argument put forward by the writer of P18 is also only interpretable from the knowledge of the socio-economic and political intricacies of the issues involved about the states (Kwara and Kogi) in question. Also, a clear understanding of the implications of certain ideological references of 'we,' 'they' and 'us' in the above conversation, goes beyond the semantic notions of these items. It is at the discourse/pragmatic level of analysis that the meaning of 'we' (i.e. the good Nigerian Christian south, the victims of terrorist attacks and the natural producers of

Nigeria's oil wealth) and 'they,' (i.e. the bad northern Muslims, terrorists, and parasites of 'our' oil economy) become clearer. Similarly, P20-P24, being reactions to a rape incident are expressed with some local slogans and expressions that are totally foreign to a non-Ghanaian or West African. In many of the Ghanaian threads (e.g. P22, P24, P25), the expression 'paa' occurs frequently. This expression is common among the Akans of Ghana, among which the word means 'good' but is used in the threads as a form of exclamation often used to express surprise or disappointment. 'Akaila' in P24 is the nickname of the accused rapist. Other forms of exclamation identified in the Ghanaian threads include 'eii' and 'asem oh' (the latter represents 'it's a problem'). Interestingly these local forms are used in the context of the standard/high variety of WAE, showing that they are not exclusive to the non-standard (low) varieties.

7.2 Code-Switching in Standard WAE

One of the main findings of this research is that online text-based discourse produced by West Africans frequently feature aspects of the standard variety of English mixed (or switched) with the local pidgin. This modality is viewed in this study as discursively creative, either used to maintain informality and solidarity or is used to express some complex thoughts that may be difficult to express in Standard English. In the samples below (obtained from Nigerian, Sierra Leonean and Ghanaian forums), there is one form of 'code-switching' between the high variety and the local pidgin and another. A sample from the Sierra Leone data (i.e. P32), shows switching between English and the local Krio; and a switch from English to the local language in the Ghanaian sample (i.e. P33; P34). According to Amuzu (2002), the Ewe-English code-

switching consistently follows a 'possessive adnominal construction' which was a 'test for the matrix-language frame model' (p.147). In the Nigerian data, many of the reactions followed the news of the Madalla bombing and the report of the killing of ten Christians in Borno state in 2011.

P26. *Ok ohh!!! No be the same people wey fg wan dialogue with and give amnesty be this*? Something is definately fishy here... (fg = federal government)

P27. I think we southerners need to listen to the wisdom of Wole Soyinka. I keep saying we need to cooperate much more than we are doing now; *make una shine eye or one day de trap go close.*

P28. *Hmmmmm, Heeennn Ok OO. Guy take am easy OO. Learn to speak in riddles/Parables. Abi you be JACK BAUER of 24*? Your speculations may be right but Remember, Revolution Requires Technicalities and Courage... More and more. *Make dem no send you to Chinese Prison like Jack oooo*.

P29. *Na wah o,* just read it on BBC now.

P30. We have so many idle policemen in *dis* country sitting down under trees in their stations doing nothing. Why not beef up security in the north by sending *dem* there. *Who no wan go make him resign.*

P31. This silly Christians!!!you're there looking. You better arm and defend yourselves *una wey dey stay village for borno again kai...una go dey slip dey drool like say nofin dey happen*

P32. It always makes me feel at home, when i slot in the one pot video tape in my VCR. Those guys can make u laugh yourself to death. So which native tribe do u think is a little better in speaking this our creole *we the temenes-to kod if u toit me a ko so u saa me na man mendes always have to start with kooo dakay ge me d lum.* Am not trying to offend anybody just *wana* have fun.

P33.*ehi, sister nie,*
fr3 me na yen di
nkm
P34. *Kwaku ma te,*
m3 fr3 wo

Interestingly, the pidgin dimension of the samples above not only adds some bits of social identification among interactants in the threads but more importantly, a great deal of informality. Very often the so-called 'puritan' English often fails woefully to communicate communality and solidarity among non-native speakers/users. In some African traditional settings, speakers of 'pure English' to people who are less educated are usually isolated and viewed as 'arrogant'. Hence, conversations on the social media always introduce some forms of cultural flavour in form of coinages, code-switching or the local pidgin. However, some of the pidgin versions in the conversations above are Nigerian/Ghanaian pidgin idioms, for example to 'shine eye' in P27 means to be careful, while 'na wah o' in P29 is an idiomatic exclamation that reflects the speaker's overwhelming disappointment. Thus, a switch between English and the local Pidgin or a local language by the internet users is a deliberate discourse strategy that not only occurs frequently but is in fact stabilizing as a feature of West African English on the Internet.

Another finding of this research is that standard variety occurs more in the data than the low variety; the main possible reason being that online communication (for now) appears to be the privileged reserve of educated African. 'Educated African' in this context however, will include secondary school leavers, whose variety of English falls within the *mesolect* continuum - a semi-standard intermediate sub-variety commonly associated with the less educated and used in informal situations.

7.3 Non-Standard WAE on the Internet

Okoro (1986) argues that a uniform competence in the use of English is impossible, especially in a second language situation. He further argues that an arbitrary delimitation of users according to educational level is also problematic because education alone is not reliable. What should guide proper delineation of categories of speakers of English Nigeria for example, should be the ability to speak the standard Nigerian English. Thus, Okoro distinguished between the standard variety of Nigerian English and the non-standard variety on the basis of the following criteria (i) those that contain outright grammatical errors (ii) those that are misuses of the code (iii) those that are 'peculiarly' Nigerian (iv) those that have a distinct localized Nigerian flavour. Numbers (iii) and (iv) are associated with the standard variety. In line with Okoro's (1986) argument, I argue in this study that WAE does not constitute non-Standard British/American English or a bunch of errors. In the data, samples from the threads and comments reveal features of the non-standard variety comprising the mesolect and basilect varieties. A few examples from NigE, SLEng and GhaEng are identified and analysed below:

> **P35**. Sharia is just a law, mostly criminal law. It has nothing to do with your prosperity. If the people want to ***be govern by the law*** (sic) of their religion fine, it has nothing to do with good & bad governance. The BOKO HARAM thing

is unfortunate event triggered by sad and uneducated. *Sharia law have* (sic) nothing to do with prosperity.
P36. This is a lot of digits for an emergency number. A short number will *be more easy* (sic) to remember
P37. I Love My Jesus!!! A peace maker,a loving son of most most High God *Every where He go* (sic) He was doing good. He is the price of PEACE.
P38. Pls how does JTF normally know that boko haram wants to attack? Where do they get this *informations* from (sic)?
P39.You are not *entitile* to take part in this *dicuion*, you are one of the worst *triberlistic person ever live*. if you can go back to my article about *you not fit to* be my *prisident*, you will see yourself playing the tribe card."YOUNG BLOOD" should stop and think before *he start* (sic) contradicting himsilf. When you do that your true *colors shows,* (sic) colors which may not be *codinated*. if these are the *atribuits* you want to drag sierra leone in the mud with, *guss what we will pass*. (Dec 18, 2008)

P40. My name is Patricia Gbateh Josiah i love the place of *my born* (sic) (Sierra Leone). No tribe in Sierra Leone is bias. We can be a *litle* bitchy when we want. (Oct 27, 2012)
P41. mende people stop dis foolishness we *temne people dont hate nobody* we live with all the *tribs i*n sierra leone you guys know that,*4 a matter or fact* even in the western world u guys still bring that nasty habit of tribal, *tegloma is a proof whenever* sierra leoneans come together they *always deviate themselves*,... (*dissociate themselves*)
P42. I know the father of this boy and I just speaking with my mom about it because the guy and his father *attends (sic)* the same church with my Mom. There is something about this whole story from what I have gathered so far (Ghana)

The non-standard variety is marked by some general grammatical errors ranging from the omission of particles for verbs e.g. 'be govern by...' (governed) in P.35; subject/verb concord errors e.g. 'Sharia law have' (has) in P35; 'he go' (goes) in P.37, 'he start' (starts), in P39, and 'the guy and his father attends...' in P42; errors with comparison e.g. 'more easy' (easier) and the pluralisation of non-count nouns e.g. 'informations' in P38. In P39, the Sierra Leone writer exemplifies a mixture of the basilect variety with the local pidgin; this

version is often characteristic of phonetic spelling e.g. 'entitile' (entitled), 'prisident' (president), 'himsilf' (himself), 'guss' (guess) and misuse of code e.g. 'place of my born' (birth).

Some earlier researchers in NigE had erroneously included the non-standard variety as forming part of the general 'Nigerian English.' Odumuh (1984) for instance, included the non-standard variety as aspects of SNE, which in his view constitutes the process of the domestication of English in Nigeria. Errors associated with the invariant tag system (e.g. he is a Nigerian, isn't it?) and the pluralisation of non-count nouns (e.g. 'informations'/ 'equipments') are viewed as 'Nigerian flavour.' In the current study however, features that are obvious errors in grammar are viewed as forming part of the non-standard (basilect) variety.

7.4 The Local Pidgin in Online Conversations

This research also shows that the local pidgin occurs frequently in the online forums. Interestingly, this variety is more widely spoken in West Africa. In Nigeria for example, the local pidgin is more widely spoken than the SNE and is in fact a mother tongue for a number of families in some communities and towns in the 'south-south' region (Ofulue, 2004). It is a neutral language among the several ethnic groups of the multilingual Nigeria, and is widely used in advertising, entertainment, music, literature and the media; thus, has become a major language of interaction in the social media and online forums. In the data, the local pidgin (a.k.a 'pidgin English'), occurs much more in the Nigerian forums than in

the Ghanaian and Sierra Leone forums. The examples below from the data clearly illustrate this. I have as much as possible, attempted to provide some conservative translations of some of them, which may be difficult to a non speaker. But those that may not pose any problem to readers are left the way they appear in the data. The conversations are reactions to the activities of the Nigerian Joint Military Task Force (JTF) to confront the Boko Haram attacks and the report that says: 'Gunmen attack Abuja: Boko Haram holding facility' (Jennydove, *10:22am On Nov 26, 2012)*. P57 is a response to a post that accuses the Ghanaian government of incompetence.

> **P43**. My people, ooooo!!!
> **P44**. I tire o! Dem no get email too? See as number plenty die! How pesin wan memorize this one for brain? I never sabi my own number finish, na JTF number I go sabi? Dis people never serious to fight crime! (*I'm surprised, don't they have email address? How does anyone memorize these numbers? I haven't even memorized mine. This people are not serious about combating crime.*)
> **P45**. na true u talk oo (*You said the truth*)
> **P46**. where u keep ur sense? �
> **P47**. If na to go chinese prison go make things better for this country, then why

not? Afterall, life for naija currently no be still the same thing as prison sentence (*naija – Nigeria*)

P48. Teeco, me too am ready for them with all cost.😁 anyway they want am god will surely prevail over them. and besides i don they learn hw to shoot... (*I'm ready for them too i.e. Boko Haram. Any how they want it...*)

P49. Na wa for dis idiot boko haram ooo (*I'm disgusted with...*)

P50. See dis xtians in the north should better buy gun put for house..all dis one wey 4 dey look go dey show themselves anyhw cos we no dey fight in the name of religion... (*Christians in the north should keep guns at home and not just sit back and watch, simply because we don't fight in the name of religion*)

P51. Now dey for don join normal people now... Chaff and Rice!! How we go take separate this one now... Too bad (*They should have join the normal people, how do you separate chaff from rice?*)

P52. *Oga Jona*...don't mind them *jare,* u promised us next year june dt boko haram menace wil becum a thing of d past but sadly Nigerian misquoted u meant dis year....(*Jona sir, please don't mind them...* 'Jona' represents 'Jonathan, the President)

P53. we go just sidon 4 ground dey look like donkey

(*We just sit on the ground and watch like donkeys*)

P54. All the money dem mention here. Nah price tag

P55. Why this nah, it seem u are 1 of their member under buhari command, Eronko lasan lasan (*mere beast*) ori e ti buru, oloriburuku oshi (*mentally deranged, stupid person*)

P55. u smoke weed?

P56. Make them plan failure

P57. This Sekou guy get big mouth papa

The Nigerian pidgin is said to be a hybrid of English and the Nigerian local languages. Its development and initial use as trade contact language between the Portuguese and the Nigerian natives, could also have introduced some lexical items from Portuguese into the earlier version of the Nigerian pidgin. The modern version of the pidgin language is arguably a combination of indigenized English and Nigerian languages. Examples of some prominent pidgin lexical items in the data are explained below:

(i) 'Oga/ogah' (master or boss) and 'jare' (equivalent to the English 'come on'), in P36, are Yoruba words. In P39, there is a complete switch to a Yoruba language in order to use imprecations and swear words.

(ii) 'Nah'/ 'na' (is) and 'una'/ 'unu' (polite/plural 'you') are Igbo words. However, some of the uses of 'nah' in the above conversations are not Igbo (e.g. P39).

(iii) 'Sabi' (to know) is a remainder feature of Portuguese

(iv) A repetition of 'o' (i.e. 'ooo') at the end of a word is a pidgin

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form of emphasis of the idea being expressed. In some contexts, (e.g. crisis), it is used to express a sense of urgency.

Arguably, the Nigerian pidgin rather than being viewed as a version of non-standard English should pass for a distinct variety considering its spread, communicative significance and socio-cultural functions in Nigeria. Nigerian English on new media platforms has thrown some light on how language users manipulate aspects of Nigerian English through some forms of linguistics creativity.

7.5   Linguistic Creativity in Online WAE

As highlighted above, computer and information technology have given rise to what has come to be known as 'the language of the internet' (Crystal, 2006; 2011) with its unique style characterized by spelling manipulations, rebus writing and abbreviations. Thus, the Internet and mobile telephony have indeed constrained the way people use language electronically, especially by forcing them to restrict conventional writing to mere abbreviations and coding, which is often difficult for a non-initiate to decode. This for users has reduced the amount of time they spend trying to compose textual materials, and have in the process been able to achieve some degree of informality in written communication. In the data of this study, several forms of linguistic creativity in both standard and non-standard varieties WAE are identified. Unfortunately however, some forms of abbreviations and chopping off of some letters from certain words have always deformed or destroyed their general semantic senses. 'cout of justice' (court of justice) in P66 below (by a Sierra Leone writer) is a good example. Also, certain

rebus writings make interpretation of meaning extremely difficult. For example in P34 above, **'**_Kwaku ma te, m3 fr3 wo' (an Akan expression almost equivalent to 'I have heard the truth')_ is still fussy here because the 'm3 fr3' makes the expression unclear. But the creative combination of rebus writing with the local language is the product of the adaptation of information technology to language use. Some more examples are displayed in the samples below:

P58. @Mavor, The HOLY union will last longer than you'll ever imagine, NATHING will happen, as long as people like Obasanjo can LOOT the treasury **&** get away with it. Jonathan **&** Sambo set aside 1 billion naira for their feeding in 2012,.. @ WORST, Nigeria, will become a FULL BLOWN SOMALIA. **FYI,** It is already. (FYI – for your information)

P59. pls whoeva is within **d environ shud pls** come out and help. **D** scene here is horrendous, bodies scattered everywhere. **It luks lyk sumtin** from a horror movie

P60. President...........**sir i need 2 go 4** an undercover.......promise me **u'll** take care of my daughter **wen am** gone.......tanks sir. **WATCH OUT 4** SEASON 9

P61. Is high time we start bombing **&** killing

all **dis** miserable Muslims in **de** south eastern states... {thinking} **bt dey re** all miserable gays...shoe makers, tailors etc
P62. blah blah blah...when *u guyz r* through *wif ur blabins*......then pray to God *4* peace *nd* unity....GOD BLESS NIGERIA
P63. yea, kiss *fm* abuja jst said it on air now*. d info nw is dt soldiers hav bin deployd 2* cordon off *d plac*. God *hlp and protct us al.jus enjy d xmas naija pple,they cnt brk* our spirit
P64 i left it (my sense) *wit* my girl *frnd*
P65. we will *fu#c#k u* drone attackers americans arses (Jan 20, 2012)
P66. Some of this history people. why they don't leave the politic in Sierra leone? befor they face cout of justic!
P67. I really am ashamed!!!!! Imagine Obama was suddenly taken ill.... even Cheney who had undergone triple bypass surgery countless times plus a transplant had all the medical care the world could offer...*%$#$$@@#*

these idiots deserve to be flogged publicly. And Mills, a man of his stature couldn't make decisions for himself *????*
P68. Indeed a sad day for Ghanaians. You don't know what you've got till it's gone.
so heart breaking....I mean how.

Typing on computer keyboards, for instance texting, indeed makes creativity in language use inevitable and affords the users the opportunity to explore and develop imaginative ways of making computer-mediated communication (CMC) work best for them. This not only allows them to experiment with language but also to use language in an informal and playful manner. In the conversation above for instance, Internet writing is replete with abbreviations and spelling manipulations where vowels are often omitted (e.g. fm, frnd, d, bt, pple, P62, P63, P64 etc,); non-standard spelling (e.g. jus, ur, hav, sumtin, justic, etc P.59, P64, P67); syllabograms or rebus writing (e.g. need2, go4 etc. P60); phonetic spelling (e.g. wit, whoeva, dis, etc. P59, P64, etc), the use of symbols (e.g. &, @) etc, P59) and the use of emoticons (e.g. P48; , P68). Emoticons are simulations for emotional expressions such as joy or sadness. For example P68, expresses sadness, and simulates someone crying over the news of the death of the Ghanaian president. Symbols are also used in the data to express anger. For example, '%$#$$@@# these idiots...' in P67, is an angry reaction to the report that the Ghanaian president did not receive adequate medical attention before he died. 'These idiots' refers to the medical team. Similarly '*fu#c#k u* drone attackers americans arses' is another angry reaction to the news of

American drone attack in Pakistan. Here, the '#' is not the usual *hashtag* that represents the categorization of certain posts under some semantic topics, rather an expression of anger. Punctuation marks are generally omitted in the online writing genre; and writing is sometimes either in all caps or all lower case. Shorts words are often preferred to long ones. Wood et al (2010), argue that texting being used in this way can help in developing sensitivity, confidence and flexibility with phonology and orthography, which may in turn enhance the development of a student's literacy skills. Interestingly, these forms of creativity are found in both standard and non-varieties of WAE.

8. Conclusion

This study shows that WAE is evidently represented in CMC with all the features (e.g. lexical, semantic and discourse variations) that are identified with this variety of English. In the Nigerian, Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean forums, three varieties of WAE are evident namely the acrolect (high), mesolect (middle), and basilect (low). The local pidgin is not usually considered as a variety of English in Nigeria. It is rather viewed as a distinct language that may be used as the Nigerian lingua franca due to its wide usage alongside its socio-cultural functions. In the online forums the local pidgin is used with some degree of predictability. The forums also demonstrate some significant levels of linguistic creativity, usually associated with computer-mediated communication. This shows that online West African communicators are effectively adapting their socio-cultural nuances of language use to modern information technology.

Acknowledgment

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