

# The Role of Emphatic Stress in the Spoken English of Selected Nigerian Final-Year Undergraduates

G. Y. Sadiq

---

## Abstract

*This paper aims specifically at examining the role of one of the most neglected aspects of supra-segmental phonology (emphatic stress for special meaning) in Nigeria – a country that comprises of a multiplicity of tonal indigenous languages, cultures and ethnic groups. A single-shot test consisting of fifty short-answer type questions is administered to seven hundred and twenty-six respondents drawn randomly from five Nigerian universities, three Federal Colleges of Education and two Polytechnics in order to collect data for the investigation. Our findings indicate that the English Language mastery of the respondents, and by implication that of a large number of “educated” Nigerians, is generally very poor. Some of the probable causes of the problem are finally discussed and solutions proffered so as to promote greater proficiency in the use and understanding of emphatic stress.*

**Keywords:** Phonetics, Phonology, Stress, Rhythm, Intonation.

## Introduction

Nigerian languages are basically tonal in nature where individual words have definite patterns (Williams, 1990). Such words may be identical in

their individual sound segments, but carry different tonal patterns that affect meaning. Conversely, English is said to be a stress-timed, rather than a syllable-timed language. In any typical English utterance, each group of stressed and unstressed syllables is spoken in roughly the same time, no matter how many unstressed syllables are in the group (Clark, Yallop & Fletcher, 2007).

Stress in English has been examined especially with reference to foreign speakers of the language. Jones (1956) defines it as the degree of force with which a speaker pronounces a sound or a syllable. Christophersen (1956:153) buttresses this point in his observation that:

*A characteristic feature of English compared with many African languages is the use of stress. In any English utterance consisting of several syllables some of the syllables are strongly stressed, and some are weakly stressed. When we say that a certain syllable is strongly stressed, we mean that it is uttered with great energy. The air is ejected from the lungs with effort, and the other speech organs perform their actions with more vigour than for a weakly stressed syllable. The total effect is that the stressed syllable seems louder than the others. English is full of "loud" syllables like that; they make any English utterance sound jerky compared with the even flow of many African languages.*

The nature of stress could also be examined from the point of view of production and perception, levels of stress (secondary, primary and unstressed) as well as placement of stress within the word (words with two, three, four or more syllables) or sentence (Roach, 1983). We are, however, concerned in this paper with the placement of stress within a sentence, that is, sentential stress. According to Allen (1954), we can generally assume that in any normal sentence we shall stress only the significant words such as nouns (and some pronouns, notably interrogatives), demonstratives, adjectives, most adverbs as well as verbs (and auxiliaries in certain circumstances). He explains further that the other words that are normally unstressed in a sentence are mostly form-words which join together the words that carry meaning such as prepositions, auxiliaries, conjunctions and pronouns. Other writers support this view

point (See for example, Gimson, 1980; O'Connor, 1980; Yadugiri, 2006; Clark, Yallop & Fletcher, 2007). Allen also maintains that the ability to move smoothly and steadily from one stress to the next, and to fit in the unstressed syllables between them, forms the basis of a good natural English accent.

We may give a few examples here. Let us assume a straight forward statement or piece of information without any special emphasis or contrast like "*I saw him in class yesterday*". It will be pronounced as: [ai 's. him in 'kl.s 'jestedei]. The same utterance, however, may have different implications depending on where we place a special emphasis or emphatic stress as the following examples suggest:

- i. I saw him in class yesterday. (Not you or anybody else). It also answers the question *Who* saw him yesterday?
- ii. I 'Saw him in 'class 'yesterday. (I wasn't told). It also answers the question *What* did you do yesterday?
- iii. I 'saw 'Him in 'class 'yesterday. (Not her or anyone else). It also answers the question *Who* did you see in class yesterday? Or Did you see me in class yesterday?
- iv. I saw him In class yesterday. (Not outside).
- v. I saw him in Class yesterday. (Not in office). It also answers the question *Where* did you see him yesterday?
- vi. I saw him in class Yesterday. (Not the day before last or any other time). It also answers the question *When* did you see him?

It is this kind of stress for special meaning or emphatic stress that is the major concern of this paper. It is very important because, apart from the obvious habit of exaggerating the movement of the voice when emotionally excited, there is the very important English speech habit of emphasising one or two words in a sentence to give special point to the speaker's ideas (Allen 1954). The use of such stress patterns is however generally lacking in the utterances of most non-native English speakers.

### **The Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess the ability of final-year Nigerian undergraduates in the use (productive level) and understanding (receptive level) of emphatic stress for special meaning which the researcher observed



to be almost non-existent in their spoken English. The choice of this category of students was borne out of the consideration that they had gone through all the levels of education and were now 'educated' enough and ready for absorption into the labour market.

### **Samples**

The samples for the study were seven hundred and twenty-six (726) final year students drawn randomly from five (5) Nigerian universities, three (3) Colleges of Education and two (2) Polytechnics. These universities are Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria; Bayero University, Kano (B.U.K.); Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto (UDUS); University of Lagos (UNILAG), and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). The colleges are Federal Colleges of Education in Zaria, Kano and Abeokuta while the polytechnics are Kaduna Polytechnic and Abia State Polytechnic. The researcher selected these institutions of higher learning with the hope that the samples so drawn would be fairly representative of the final-year undergraduates in similar institutions across the country.

### **Measuring Instrument**

The major measuring instrument was a single-shot test consisting of fifty (50) short answer type questions which was designed with a marking scheme by the researcher and authenticated by a native speaker of British origin. This native speaker, who is also a linguist, assisted with the reading and recording on cassette tape each of the sentences at normal speed. The samples' task was simply to state the implication of each sentence as exemplified in the instructions.

The secondary source of data collection was a questionnaire that was designed also by the researcher specifically to find out the samples' level of exposure to emphatic stress. All these (primary and secondary sources), together with the raw data which the researcher personally observed and recorded first hand from a number of educated Nigerian users of the language in both formal and informal situations, provided the data for this study.

## Results and Discussion

The samples' test scripts were marked and analysed using simple percentages. The pass mark was pegged at 40% because that is what normally obtains in most institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Table 1 shows the distribution of mean scores and standard deviations in the various institutions of higher learning under study.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Mean Scores and Standard Deviations in Various Institutions

Institutions	$\bar{X}$	S. D.	No of passes	
			%	Total
1. A.B.U. Zaria	34.7	12.8	39 (30.4)	128
2. B.U.K.	18.1	14.4	8(12.3)	65
3. UDUS	29.6	15.8	12(14.1)	85
4. UNILAG	16.4	12.3	16(26.7)	60
5 UNN	18.8	12.8	12(20.7)	58
6. F.C.E., Zaria	17.3	4.1	17(17)	100
7 F.C.E., Kano	29.7	11.6	11(16.9)	65
8. F.C.E., Abeokuta	21.4	15.2	8(14.6)	55
9. Kaduna Polytechnic	30.2	17.4	9(13.9)	65
10. Abia State Polytechnic	27.3	9.1	5(11.1)	45
Total			137 (18.87)	726

It is glaring that the general performance of the samples was very poor. Out of a total number of 726 respondents drawn from the ten institutions of higher learning, only 137 or approximately 19% passed by scoring 40% and above. That means that the remaining 81% all failed by scoring less than the cut-off pass mark of 40%. Specifically, only 39 (30.4%) out of 128 respondents passed from A.B.U, Zaria; 8 (12.3%) out of 65 respondents from Bayero University, Kano; 12 (14.1%) out of 85 respondents from Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto; 16 (26.7%) out of 60 respondents from University of Lagos; and 12 (20.7%) out of 58 respondents from University of Nigeria Nsukka. Similarly, only 17(17%) out of 100 respondents from F.C.E, Zaria; 11(16.9%) out of 65 respondents from F.C.E, Kano; 8(14.6%) out of 55 respondents from

F.C.E, Abeokuta; 9(13.9%) out of 65 respondents from Kaduna Polytechnic; and 5(11.1%) out of 45 respondents from Abia State Polytechnic actually passed the test.

The above findings may not come as surprise. This is because there was a strong co-relation between the samples' performance in the test and the information they supplied in the questionnaire administered to them. A total of five hundred and sixty of them (77.13%) confessed they had never, at any stage of their education, been taught anything called emphatic stress, one hundred and six others (14.6%) claimed they could not recall whether or not they had ever been taught while the remaining sixty (8.26%) confirmed that they had not been sufficiently groomed in that aspect of English Language.

The above information suggests that emphatic stress does constitute a big problem for a large number of Nigerian final-year undergraduates and by extension to an equally large number of educated Nigerian users of the language. One of the reasons for this very poor performance could be related to the observation of Amayo (1986) and Jowitt (1990) that a teacher of spoken English who can serve as a model is unfortunately a rare commodity in the Nigerian situation. This study supports the observation that, with the gross under-funding of educational institutions at all levels, schools are ill-equipped and teachers seldom receive the basic training they require to function effectively. In addition they are least motivated. These and many other factors invariably hamper the average Nigerian learner's/ user's ability to communicate effectively including the use and understanding of emphatic stress.

We discovered the strong discriminatory power of the test instrument in distinguishing the low scorers from the high ones. The range of scores was from 0% to 65%, with a large number of the respondents falling in the 20% - 30% bracket (negatively skewed). The highest score was 65%, followed by 60%, and our investigation revealed that these two respondents were science students who had spent many years abroad. Whether or not they were formally taught the art of using emphatic stress we could still see the impact or influence of a rich native English environment upon them.



### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper examined the role of emphatic stress in relation to the spoken English of final-year Nigerian undergraduates. The results show that the performance of the respondents was indeed very poor; which could possibly be attributed to the poor funding of the education sector around which several other problems might revolve. The major implication of findings from this study is that Nigeria's final-year undergraduates and, by extension a large number of educated Nigerians, might not be able to communicate effectively especially at the international level where stress, rhythm and intonation play a very vital role in daily communication.

In view of the foregoing, it is recommended that education be given its rightful position in Nigeria in terms of funding, supervision and general control. Teachers must be sufficiently trained (academically and professionally) and motivated to teach English. They should also be innovative or creative in their teaching by helping their students have a feel of how English is used in native environments through the use of audio-visual aids like radio, television, compact discs, cassette tapes and video films. An exchange programme would also be very helpful whereby teachers and students are sent abroad for one or two months in return for some native speakers for the same period. This would likely improve the spoken English of many Nigerian teachers and students significantly.

### **References**

- Allen, W. S. (1954). *Living English speech*. London: Longmans.
- Amayo, M. A. (1986). Teaching English pronunciation in Nigeria for international intelligibility: The supra-segmental. In Unoh, S. O. (ed.), *Use of English in communication*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Clark, J., Yallop, C. & Fletcher, J. (2007). *An introduction to phonetics and phonology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Christophersen, P. (1956). *An English phonetics course*. London: Longman.
- Dunstan, E. (ed.). (1969). *Twelve Nigerian languages*. London: Longman.
- Gimson, A. C. (1970). *An introduction to the pronunciation of English*. London: Edward Arnold.

- Jones, D. (1956). *The pronunciation of English*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Jowitt, D. (1990). *Nigerian English usage*. Ibadan: Longman.
- O'Connor, J. D. (1980). *Better English pronunciation*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Roach, P. (1983). *English phonetics and phonology – A practical course*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, D. (1990). *English language teaching – An integrated approach*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Yadugiri, M. A. (2006). *Making sense of English*. New Delhi: Viva books.