

Aspects of Semantics of Standard British English and Nigerian English: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract

The concept of meaning is a complex one in language study when cultural features are added. This is mandatory because language cannot be completely separated from culture in which case language and culture complement each other. When there are two varieties of a language in a society, i.e. two varieties functioning side by side in a speech community, there is tendency for misconception. It is therefore imperative to make a linguistic comparative study of varieties of such languages. In this paper, a semantic contrastive study is made between Standard British English (SBE) and Nigerian English (NE). The semantic study is limited to aspects of semantics: semantic extension (Kinship terms, metaphors), semantic shift (lexical items considered are 'drop' 'befriend' 'dowry' and escort) acronyms (NEPA, JAMB, NTA) linguistic borrowing or loan words (Seriki, Agbada, Eba, Dodo, Iroko) coinages (long leg, bush meat; bottom power and juju). In the study of these aspects of semantics of SBE and NE lexical terms, conservative statements are made, problems areas and hierarchy of difficulties are highlighted with a view to bringing out areas of differences. The study will also serve as a guide in further contrastive studies in some other levels of languages.

Keywords: Contrastive linguistics, British English, Nigerian English, Kinship, Semantics

1. Introduction

When two languages are in contact, there is the tendency to view the second language in the system of the first language. This is because linguistics is comparative in the sense that any statement made about a particular phenomenon of language will usually imply a generalisation from several phenomena and this, in turn is based on the process of comparison. The discipline draws on other disciplines and the idea of transfer is basic to contrastive linguistics. Transfer is not related to this alone if certain knowledge is acquired but will definitely influence other knowledge or habit to be acquired later. The idea of reality is based on what is already in the knowledge before. The language already internalized applies to the other because one task will facilitate another new one. The knowledge of task 'A' will definitely help task 'B'. Contrastive linguistics is therefore dependent on the two languages being compared. The concepts of interference, bilingualism are inherent in the discipline. Ogunsiji (2010:20).

The regional variation (Dialect), social variation, social class and education are therefore notable factors for language varieties in any society. Nigerian English variety is rooted in the manifestations of the contact which users of English as a second language have over time. All these and other factors are encapsulated in this paper

2. Literature Review

It is pertinent therefore to briefly examine the concept of **Bilingualism** and **Interference** in this paper, with a review of related literature.

2.1 Concept of Bilingualism

Akindele and Adegbite (2012) define bilingualism as the use of two languages by an individual or a community. In other words, bilingualism allows the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or speech community. Bilingualism is also described as the ability of an individual to produce meaningful utterances in the other language. It can be viewed as a situation where an individual has the ability to speak two languages in a bilingual society but more proficient in one of the two languages than the other.

It is important to note that bilingualism has an essential characteristics of being a consequence of language in contact which deals with the direct or indirect influence on the other Nigeria, for example is a bilingual community where many bilingual communities exist such as Yoruba and English, Hausa and English as well as Igbo and English.

Adetuyi and Jegede (2016) traced the origin of bilingualism to colonization, trade, annexation, conquest and borderlines. All these accounted for the introduction and dominance of English language on the culture and administration of Nigeria. Studies have shown that when bilinguals speakers code switch, they switch from language to language with ease and fluidity, following the syntactic and semantic rules of both languages (Tamunobelema 2015)

INTERFERENCE, however refers to those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilingual as a result of familiarity with more than one language. This implies that there is rearrangement of patterns that results from the introduction of foreign elements into more highly - structured domains of language such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a harder part of the morphology and syntax, and some areas of vocabulary, culture and discourse (Wienreich, 1974) cited in Akindele and Adebite (2012). Interference of Nigerian indigenous language with the Standard British English (SBE) has therefore created a semantic difference between the two illustrated in this paper.

Contrastive analysis has to do with the language in contact. That is two languages which exist side – by – side in a speech community. However the analysis of this work is based on two varieties of English language in which case Standard British English will be contrasted with Nigerian English. To have a better understanding of this paper we shall examine a brief historical background of how English language became a variety in Nigeria.

The English language was originally the language spoken by Germanic group of people: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jute who invaded Britain and assimilated the Celts, the original inhabitants (Ogunsiji 2014: 12-17). From Britain, the language was transported to other different parts of the world which led to the emergence of varieties of English such as American English, Canadian English, Australian English, Indian English, South African English, and of course Nigerian English. The geographical spread of the language gave birth to varieties of English. Ogunsiji (2014).

A language gives expression to its environment. In other words, it is a reflection of the total culture. The acquisition of lexical proficiency therefore depends, to an extent, on the richness of the environment in terms of the events, experiences and items which provide the vocabulary of a language. The implication of this is that, the more English-like an environment is, the richer the lexical repertoire available to learners of English as L₂. Those words that express the sophistication of the English society may not be readily available to L₂ learners. A deficiency in lexical repertoire has an effect on speech. The learners become very limited and predictable. Most second language learners of English in Nigeria begin by taking note of the total semantic implications of words, phrases and sentences structures in the L₂. As already hinted, for peculiar English as a Second Language circumstances, they modify these native-speaker usages. The degree of modification done to any meaning may reach some points at which the native English speakers may be unable to comprehend the new semantic states in ESL. Words like ‘silly’, ‘liar’, ‘dubious’, ‘pleasant’ and a host of other do not draw the same reactions from native speakers as with Nigerian speakers of English. This is because meaning is highly culture-bound and remarkable differences exist between native English culture and the various Nigeria cultures. It is on this premises that this paper will attempt a contrastive study of standard British English and Nigeria English contrast Standard British English. The analysis will focus on aspects of semantics

3. English Language in Nigeria

The emergence of English in Nigeria dated back the early nineteenth century when freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned to their fatherland as a result of abolition of slave trade. Majority of the freed slaves, who had Christian orientation coupled with their formal education abroad were useful as translator or interpreters in the Christian evangelisation during the early missionary period.

Though, Adetuyi and Okediran (2004) rightly observed that the colonialists were making the populace literate for their selfish interest, English language remains a legacy left behind by them. Some indigenes were able to learn and use the language after which they became catechist and teachers in the mission schools.

English language eventually attains dominance on all facets of life in Nigeria. It was used by the British to rule the country then and is still the language of administration in Nigeria till now. It is a language of inter-ethnics communication, international trade and education.

Adetuyi and Jegede (2016) even attests to its importance in Nigeria as being used to conduct legislative, executive and judicial functions at the three tiers of local, state and federal Government levels, it should be noted however that

the multilingual nature of Nigeria accounts for the observable differentiations in English language variety in the country.

Van Parijs (2011) argues that “we need a lingua franca in Europe and across the world because its adoption and spread creates and expand translational demo... Facilitating direct communication, live or online, without the cumbersome and expensive mediation of interpretation and translation”

This is a justification of its adoption as language of communication, diplomacy, media, law, technology and education which has contributed a lot to Nigeria economy and political growth.

4. Kinship Terms

Kinship terms have to do with blood relationship that is usually brought about by marriage. Kinship term, to Oluwole (2014), is a very cogent factor among cultures especially in Africa. The meaning given to the terms are however different across cultures. In most languages, kinship is patriarchal. The English cultures hold kinship terms in a different way from Nigerian cultures. This is because the- English people are used to nuclear family system and they are very distinct in their kinship terms. They are therefore limited to the biological meanings of kinship terms like father, mother, sister, son, daughter, brother and so on, others are terms like brother-in-law, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, father-in-law, step-father, step-mother, half-brother, uncle, cousin, aunt, nephew and niece. The immediate constituent is therefore the nucleus nature of the kinship and all of them are biologically related. Thus, if an English child refers to the ideas of parent, +ADULT, +MALE/FEMALE, + HUMAN, + FATHER/MOTHER, + Blood Relation. In the area of siblings, being the siblings of the husband is identified as that of the wife as well. The following graphic illustration explains the by English kinship.

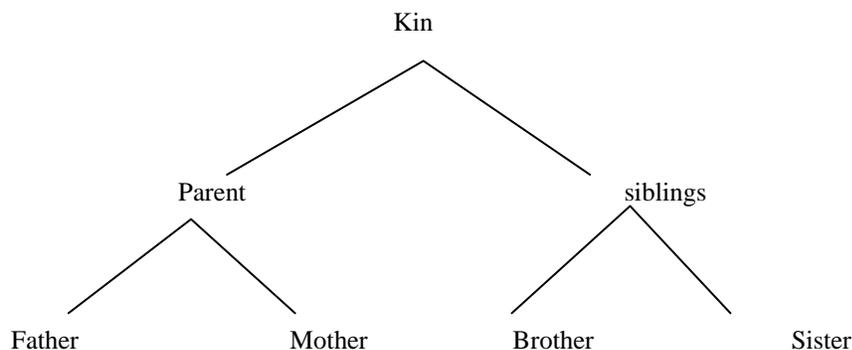


Figure 1. These encapsulate what an English people will refer to as Kin

Unlike that of English, the categories of kin among the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, when fully designed, is not limited to nuclear family and blood relation alone. Relationships are not limited to immediate siblings. It includes a collections of inter-personal relationships in which one is involved.

In Nigerian context, a single kinship term can cover a wider area of meaning. This semantic extension goes beyond physiological aspects of kinship terms. In Nigerian context we have terms like “Father”, “Mother”, “Brother”, and “Sister”. One’s brother or sister’s children are his own children too. One’s brother’s wife is also referred to as one’s wife because in Nigerian culture, extended family is recognized. This explains why terms like “uncle”, “cousins”, “aunt” and so on are not in Nigeria worldview. They are all referred to as brother and sister or in-law. The concept of seniority is shown also when a Nigerian refers to kins. We can therefore have “elder sister”. Even in a situation where there is no blood relationship, the brother and sister terms are used as a point of reference. So, the terms have wider coverage and the same thing applies to term like “father” and “mother”.

5. Contrastive Statements

According to this analysis, English operates to the nuclear family system and different terms are used to qualify the relationship. Nigeria operates the extended family structure and a few physiological terminologies are used to refer to such relationship. A word like “Omo” is used to refer to children without any gender differentiation. Such a word is usually duplicated such as:

Omo- Omo	(grand children)
Baba-Baba	(grandfather)
Iya-Iya	(grandmother)

Such duplications are not used in English. In Yoruba, for example, the term “ebi” is used to refer to family generally. This word includes all the kinship terms and all the lexical items that might be used to qualify the extended relationship in Nigerian context.

From the three major languages in Nigeria, kinship terminologies are the same in which case, “father”, “mother”, “brother”, and “sister” are highly recognized. It thus becomes a problem to a Briton when a Nigerian makes a statement like this: “This is my **mother**”.

This sentence has two possible interpretations:

1. “Mother” here could mean a biological mother
2. It could mean an aunt, or a caring woman

6. Kola

In Standard British English, the lexical item ‘kola’ refers to a fruit. However in Nigeria context, there is additional meaning to “Kola”. It could mean

- i. A fruit
- ii. It could also mean ‘money’ hence used metaphorically. Let us have this conversation.

Police: Mr Man, can I have your papers?

Driver: Take

Police: O.K. how far?

Driver: What again?

Police: Any kola for me there? We are here because of you.

Driver: Officer, I just dey come out.

The policemen demanded for ‘Kola’ after he had examined the particulars of the vehicle in this context.

Contrastive Statement

In the light of Standard British English, it will be wrong for a learner to say; “The policemen collected kola from me”, when he means to say ‘bribe’, In other words, it will be a serious problem for a British teacher (an English Teacher) when a Nigeria uses ‘Kola’ to refer to money. In solving these problems, teachers of English Language should endeavour to teach learners of English language as L₂ when and where to use such a word or lexical item (kola) because it has more than one meaning, depending on the context of the usage.

Tortoise

In Standard British English, the word ‘Tortoise’ means a reptile. In Nigerian English, tortoise has additional meaning. The domestication of English has led to this. Tortoise in Nigerian context could mean a reptile or a very cunning person. In other words, the lexical item ‘tortoise’ has more than one meaning. Let us examine this conversation.

Tunji: Did you see the man?

Bola: Don’t mind the **Tortoise**

Tunji: What happened again?

Bola: He is just too greedy.

Tunji: How do you mean?

Bola: He told the celebrant that his name is “all of us”.

To a Briton, the word “tortoise” means a reptile. He will begin to wonder how it could be possible for a human being having a communion with an animal.

However, the word “tortoise” has a clearer meaning to a Nigerian.

Semantic Shift

Semantic shift has to do with a meaning given to a lexical item because of the environment in which it finds itself aside its original meaning. English is highly domesticated in Nigeria in a way that some lexical items now have new meanings different from their original English meaning. We shall consider these three items: “Bad heart”, “Be friend”, “Drop” and “Dowry”.

BAD HEART: To have a bad heart in Standard British English is to have a malfunctioning heart. In Nigerian socio-cultural view, it means having a wicked or an evil mind. This meaning is unexpected because “bad” is ordinarily associated with events, places or persons. However, to employ it as a psychological metaphor for the heart is what makes it yield a new and unexpected meaning in Nigerian English usage. Let us have this:

Funke has a bad heart. She almost killed the boy.

Contrastive Statement

In SBE, “bad heart” means a malfunctioning heart. However in NE “bad heart” means evil or wickedness. This may likely cause a problem for learners of English (SBE) as L₂. In writing, it is therefore advisable for such learners to use the lexical item in the context of Standard British English so that they would be said to have committed an error.

DROP

In Standard British English, the word “drop” means to fall or allow something to fall by accident. However, in the parlance of Nigerian English, the word has a different meaning. To ‘drop’ in NE means to get off from a vehicle. To “alight” is the right word in Standard British English.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

The word “drop” in Nigerian context has a meaning that is slightly different from the Standard British English. Thus, problems will arise when the users of the word “drop” in Nigerian English Language now transfer it to Standard British English when they mean to say ‘alight’. Teachers of English Language should concentrate on this problematic area so as to make sure that learners of the English (SBE) as L₂ are able to choose the appropriate words to express their intention in SBE perspective.

BEFRIEND: In Standard British English, “befriend” is to act as a friend to or become a friend of somebody especially somebody who needs help for instance, ‘He befriended the young girl, giving her food and shelter’. In the Nigerian English, to befriend means to have sexual relationship with someone. This explains why in Nigerian context a “girlfriend” is one’s lover. That is, a kind of friendship that involves sex. To a Nigerian, the young girl is given food and shelter so as to win her affection. In other words there is sexual involvement in the affection.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

Using the Nigerian socio-cultural knowledge, “befriend” becomes a word for sexual affection and, the meaning of the word shifts from the Standard British English to Nigerian English. Let us consider this conversation

Ugozi: Wonder shall never end.

Chiyee: I am surprised why he descend so low. The lecturer, (of all lecturers) befriending that girl!

This is a feature of Nigerian English. The word ‘befriending’ in this conversation means a kind of affection that has the element of sexual interest. However, in standard British English, the affection does not have the element of sex. The word “befriend” therefore becomes a problem to learners of the English as a second language. Teachers of English Language should assist the learners to understand the Standard British conception of the word.

ESCORT

In Standard British English “to escort” is to accompany a person to where he is going. This has to do with provision of security. However, the meaning of “to escort” is shifted to mean “see off” in Nigeria English. We often hear: “Let me escort you to the bus stop” when the speaker actually means “Let me see you off the bus stop”.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

The semantic shift of the word “escort” now becomes a problem to the learners of English in the light of Standard British English. When there is semantic shift, the new meaning given to a lexical item constitutes a problem in SBE. In Nigerian English, it is understood to mean “to see off”. Learners of the English Language as L₂ should always check their dictionary for the original meaning of the lexical item so as not to give a different meaning to it. Since the parameter used in judging in standardization of English in Nigeria is Standard British English. In pedagogical activities, teachers should concentrate more on this problematic area as to meet up with the standard of the British English both in spoken and written forms.

DOWRY: It is commonly used in the Nigerian parlance of English to mean “money paid by or on behalf of a man for a woman as his bride price. Thus, it has the same meaning as “bride price”. In SBE, ‘dowry’ means “property that a woman brings to her husband in marriage”.

ACRONYMS: Acronyms is a common word formation process in English. Examples of common acronyms in Nigerian English include NEPA (National Electric Power Authority) JAMB (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board) INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission). Alphabetism is another phenomenon that is very close to acronyms which results in a formation pronounced as a word. Examples of Alphabetism in Nigerian English include NBTE, NUC, and NTA and so on. With Alphabetism, each letter is pronounced. We shall contrast these three acronyms: NEPA, JAMB, and NTA in Nigerian English with Standard British English.

JAMB: This is a body in Nigeria that is saddled with the responsibility of setting examinations for candidates ready for admission into tertiary institutions. Most often, in Nigerian English, this acronym is employed in discourse. Let us consider this conversation.

Fatima: There is mass failure this year

Bilikisu: JAMB is now difficult to pass

Fatima: What do we do?

Bilikisu: We will work hard to pass it.

In Nigerian context, the acronym JAMB means an examination set by the Joint Admission Matriculation Board. However, in standard British English, JAMB in the above conversation has a different meaning. It is not possible to pass the board that set examination; rather, you pass the examination that was set by the board.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

This acronym JAMB should go along with its full meaning (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board) thus the meaning becomes ambiguous. JAMB could mean Joint Admission and Matriculation Board. It could also mean Just About to Marry Bimbo.

JAMB is a body that sets examination; therefore it is wrong in Standard British English to say JAMB is now difficult to pass because the body is not the examination.

NEPA

This is a body that is responsible for electric supply in Nigeria. Its full meaning is National Electric Power Authority. To have the full meaning of this acronym, its usage should go along with the full meaning e.g. National Electric Power Authority (NEPA). However, in Nigerian English the usage of NEPA does not often go along with its full meaning. For example:-

1. NEPA has brought bill
2. NEPA has taken the light
3. My sister works at NEPA
4. I live at NEPA

The meaning of NEPA in the above sentences is ambiguous. To disambiguate it, NEPA should be written in full.

NTA

This is National Television Authority. In the parlance of Nigerian English, this Alphabetism is often used without the full meaning as we have in the following sentences:

1. Listen to the NTA
2. I have not heard it in the NTA
3. NTA is not working now
4. NTA is the correct station
5. Is that NTA?

In Standard British English, the meaning of NTA is not fully realized because NTA could stand for anything e.g. National Teacher Authority or Nigerian Transport Authority.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

In Nigerian context, NTA means, Nigerian Television Authority. However, in Standard British English, NTA could mean a different concept. This is because NTA could stand for anything. To avoid this meaning ambiguity, NTA should co-occur with its full meaning e.g.

1. Nigerian Television Authority is a good station
2. It was broadcast by Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) yesterday that, there is going to be an industrial action.

COINAGES

New words and expression are frequently coined to express new realities. Examples of such words and expressions include “Traditional medicine” “Juju” “Long leg”, “Bottom power”, “Bush meat”, “Pounded yam” and so on. All these coinages do not exist in Standard British English. Translations of the words or expression should be given for better understanding as we have them below:

Juju:	Traditional charm
Long leg:	Influence
Bush meat:	Game
Bottom power:	An illegal influence

An important lexico semantic feature of Nigerian English is linguistic borrowing or loan words. These are words that are borrowed from other languages. Examples of these linguistic borrowing are Kabiyesi (Yoruba), Igwe (Igbo), Seriki (Hausa), Eba, Agbada, Iro and Buba (Yoruba) chi (Igbo) “Dodo” meaning fried plantain (Yoruba) as in “rice and dodo, Apu (Igbo). “Iroko” as in Iroko tree etc. All these words do not exist in the British culture and such Standard British English lacks these lexical items in the dictionary. However, the above linguistic borrowing words are employed to employ the cultural realities of Nigeria.

CONTRASTIVE STATEMENT

Many of the coinages and loan words in Nigeria do not exist in Standard British English hence attention should be paid to other usage. In other words, Nigerian learners of Standard British English should endeavour to have glossary that will give the meaning of the borrowed words and again, the words should be foregrounded in a text. Language teachers, especially teachers of English Language should concentrate on these problematic areas to avoid errors in the light of Standard British English. We have done the contrastive study of some aspects of semantic Standard British English and Nigeria lexical items. However there is a need to now bring all the lexical items considered in a tabular form.

Table 1. A Semantic Extension

	Lexical items	NE meaning	SBE meaning
I	Kinship terms	Father, child, Mother, Brother, sister etc. has meaning that is beyond biological meaning	Father, child, mother, Brother, Sister etc. has only biological meaning
Ii	Tortoise	It has both conventional and metaphorical meaning	It has only conventional meaning
Iii	Kola	It has both conventional and metaphorical meaning	It has only conventional meaning

Table 2. Semantic Shift

I	Dowry	Money paid for a woman`s marriage	Property that a woman brings to her husband in marriage
Ii	Escort	To see a guest off	To accompany person to a place for security purpose in most cases
Iii	Bad heart	To have a bad heart is to be evil or wicked	To have a bad heart is to have a malfunctioning heart
Iv	Drop	To get off either from a vehicle or a higher place	To fall or allow something to fall by accident
V	Befriend	Affection win sexual involvement	Affection without women sexual involvement

Table 3. Acronyms

I	JAMB	Present, Joint Admission and Matriculation Board	Absent
Ii	NEPA	Present, National Electric Power Authority	Absent
Iii	NTA	Present, National Television Authority	Absent

Table 4. Coinages

i.	Long leg	Influence	Absent
ii.	Bush meat	Not a domestic animal	Game
iii.	Bottom power	An illegal influence	Absent
iv.	Juju	Traditional charm	Absent

Table 5. Linguistic Borrowing Or Loan Words

i.	Seriki	The title of a king in Hausa	Absent
ii.	Agbada	A large gown worn by men from Yoruba	Absent
iii.	Eba	Garri stirred into hot water until it is stiff and smooth, and used as a main dish with soup	Absent
iv.	Dodo	A fried plantain	Absent
v.	Iroko	An economic tree	An economic tree

The lexical items which are present in Nigerian English but absent in Standard British English should be considered problematic areas in learning Standard British in Nigeria.

7. Pedagogical Implications

What we have observed in contrastive study of aspects of semantics of Standard British and Nigerian English lexical items definitely has some implications for the pedagogy of the language. As a language that permeates almost all aspects of life in the country, its teaching and learning should be given due consideration Ogunsiji (2014), In the light of this, the following among others should be considered:

1. The learners should be adequately exposed to the two varieties of language especially in the aspects of semantics.
2. The learner should be exposed to as many lexical items of SBE as possible to know their original meanings.

3. Teachers of English language are to concentrate on the problematic areas as enable the learners to know the appropriate word that should be used in the context of Standard British English.
4. The literature component of the English language teaching programmes should be emphasized, since literature is language in use.
5. The English language syllabus at every level of our education should be made functional and dynamic so as to meet the needs of users of the language.
6. Relevant instructional materials should be made available and used effectively in our schools to enhance qualitative teaching-learning process.
7. Nigerian English should be elevated to the status of Standard British English and, Nigerian English dictionary should be produced as a reference book.
8. Nigerian English should not be seen as an error in the light of Standard British English.

8. Conclusion

That the English language has come to stay in Nigeria is an incontestable fact (Akindele and Adegbile 1992:58). Nigerian English will continue to exhibit some peculiar features because of its adaptation to the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. So far, we have made a cursory contrastive study of Standard British English and Nigerian English lexical items and some of its expressions. It has been severally observed that some of these expressions are deviations and therefore errors while some others are viable innovations (Odeunmi 1996a). That English has acclimatized itself to the Nigerian environment is a positive and welcome development. Caution is however needed to sieve the difference, usually jumbled, varieties that have emerged. This is necessary because, it is important to differentiate between Standard British English and Nigerian English words. With this, we shall have better access to the meaning intended in Nigerian discourse in English. We shall also be able to know the Nigerian English usage in the light of Standard British English.

The study has attempted to establish the fact that the Standard British English (SBN) and the Nigerian English (NE) lexical items have semantic extension, and semantic shift. It is also noted that there are some lexical items of Nigerian English that are not present in Standard British English. These are coinages, acronyms, loan words, Alphabetism and so on. These words came into being so as to show case the socio-cultural realities of Nigeria. The implications of this on learners and users of English (SBE) as a second language (ESL) are indeed grave. These also pose great challenges to English language teachers, particularly in secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Nigerian linguistic environment. It is therefore recommended that these two varieties of English language should be well- handled by the language teacher in the ESL situation. This would be of great help to the learners.

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