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# Syntactic Variation in Language Contact: A Case Study of Igbo-English Bilingual Discourse

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**Abstract**

Studies have shown that contact languages influence one another at various levels of structure — phonetic/phonological, morphological, semantic, pragmatic and syntactic — and that cross-linguistic influence falls into two broad categories, namely interference and borrowing. However, the existence of syntactic borrowing and the conditions under which it may occur are still debated in the literature. This study describes an on-going process of syntactic borrowing in the speech of Igbo-English bilinguals who are relatively dominant in English, and the resultant syntactic variation arising from the fact that innovative structures are used alongside native language structures. Among the instances of structural borrowing described is one that circumvents a categorial non-equivalence between the two languages, namely Igbo stative verbs versus English predicative adjectives. Data for the study come from participant observation of Igbo-English bilinguals on two university campuses, from which spontaneous speech was recorded in various types of interaction. The study finds that structural innovation is basically mediated by lexical borrowing and generally results from frequent code-switching with, and lexical borrowing from, a contact language. It highlights the importance of the individual practices of bilinguals to structural borrowing and contributes insight into recipient language agency in contact-induced cross-linguistic influence involving an African-European language pair.

## Introduction

Languages brought together by historical circumstances and social processes are said to be in contact. The languages spoken by a bilingual are also in contact, an idea attributed to Weinreich in Hickey, (2010); Matras, (2010); Sankoff(2004), who described the bilingual speaker as "the locus of language contact." Much of contemporary research in language contact is guided by the assumption that the languages spoken by bilinguals influence each other (Matras, 2010; Sankoff, 2004), i.e. cross-linguistic influence is exerted by either of the contact languages on the other. However, cross-linguistic influence is generally unidirectional, rather than bidirectional (Sankoff, 2004), often from a linguistically dominant language to a less-dominant one (Winford, 2005), and leading to changes which may be completed, on-going (or continuous), or discontinuous (Aikhenvald, 2002). In addition to cross-linguistic influences, scholars recognise language-internal mechanisms of change, which interact with external (social) factors (De Smit, 2006; Sankoff, 2004).

Two major processes of cross-linguistic influence are traditionally identified in the literature (Winford, 2005), namely borrowing and interference (also known as substratum influence, transfer or imposition). Winford (2005) notes that the multiplicity of terms used for cross-linguistic influences has led to inconsistency and imprecision in the application of terms, and poses a problem for the analysis of the outcomes of language contact as well as the processes they result from.

The term "borrowing," in this study, refers generally to a language acquiring some structural property from another language (Moravcsik in Thomason & Kaufman, 1988). The level of linguistic structure at which borrowing can occur has been a matter of debate in the language contact literature. Most scholars agree that borrowing is possible at the phonetic/phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic levels, but the syntactic level is argued to allow borrowing only under certain conditions, including recipient language agency and lexical borrowing. The present study describes syntactic borrowing as a form of cross-linguistic influence in the Igbo-English contact situation. It applies the claims about the conditions under which structural borrowing may occur to syntactic structures (that appear to be

modeled on English) observed in the speech of younger Igbo-English bilinguals who are relatively dominant in English.

## Review of Literature on Cross-linguistic Influence

Winford (2005) has noted that the difference between borrowing and interference is related to a distinction made in the literature by Van Coetsem in Sankoff (2004) and Winford (2005) between source and recipient language agency (oragentivity). The notion of agentivity is based on the psycholinguistic notion of dominance (Winford, 2005), which is characterised in terms of speakers' native languages.

Interference (or imposition) involves the agency of speakers for whom the source language is the dominant (usually the first or primary) language, and from which material is transferred into a recipient language in which the speakers are less proficient, i.e., source language agentivity (Winford, 2005). Source language agentivity is typical of Ll influences in second language acquisition (Winford, 2005) and language shift (Hickey, 2010; Sankoff, 2004:649). Ll features imposed on the L2 may include those of the vocabulary, semantics, phonology, morphology, and syntax (Winford, 2005).

Recipient language agentivity (borrowing), on the other hand, is a situation in which "native speakers of the recipient language import into their language something from another source language"(Sankoff, 2004:644). It involves the transfer of linguistic material, including structure (Van Coestem in Winford, 2005) into a recipient language via a process in which native speakers of the recipient language who have become fluent (or dominant) in the source language are the agents. Hickey (2010) suggests that the borrowing of "systemic" material such as inflections, grammatical forms, and sentence structures is only possible via recipient language agency by bilinguals.

The term "borrowing" has been a subject of much disagreement in the literature, but scholars are agreed upon the fact that foreign words found in a language generally start out as innovations (code-switching forms) that become entrenched and propagated (see Backus, 2005; Gardner-Chloros, 1995; Sankoff, 2004). This makes

code-switching "the royal road to borrowing" (Sankoff, 2004: 650) or, as Backus (2010:230) puts it, "diachronic borrowing results from synchronic codeswitching." In other words, the ability of bilinguals to draw on material from both their languages is the starting point of borrowing. Another controversy about borrowing in the literature is the level(s) of linguistic structure at which it may apply. Thomason and Kaufman (1988) assert that:

> If there is strong long-term cultural pressure from source-language speakers on the borrowing language speaker group, then structural features may be borrowed as well as phonological, phonetic, and syntactic elements, and even (though more rarely)features of the inflectional morphology. (p. 3 7) In other words, nothing in language structure is exempt from borrowing or transfer under the right circumstances (Hickey, 2010).

B01Towing at the phonetic/phonological and lexical levels is fairly established in the language contact literature (Sankoff, 2004). At the morphological level, the borrowing of bound (inflectional) morphemes is considered by scholars as one of the most resistant features of cross-linguistic influence (De Smit, 2006; Sankoff, 2004), and to be possible under "very intense contact conditions" including processes of language shift (Thomason, 2010).

The possibility of borrowing at the level of syntactic structure, is however, generally a point of contention in the literature. In addition, there are a number of issues on which scholars who subscribe to the reality of syntactic borrowing do not agree. Some authors argue that syntactic borrowing is only possible between languages that are typologically very similar (see Winford, 2005), while others claim that syntactic borrowing is always (or may be) an indirect consequence of lexical or pragmatic borrowing, i.e. borrowing at another level of linguistic structure leads to syntactic change (Backus, 2005; King in De Smit, 2006; Sankoff, 2004; Winford, 2005),

## Igbo-English Language Contact

Igbo (West Benue-Congo) is native to the five states in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and is also spoken in parts of the adjoining South-South zone. English, an Indo-European language, was introduced as a new language to the resident Igbo population (and other ethnic populations in Nigeria) as a result of colonization. A dominance relation has emerged in the contact between Igbo and English — English is the official language and the medium of national communication and integration, administration and education, while Igbo is recognised as a national language (together with Hausa and Yoruba). English is easily the dominant language in this contact situation.

However, Winford (2005) stresses that a distinction must be observed between linguistic dominance (greater proficiency in one of the languages involved in contact, which, typically, is the first or primary language of a speaker) and social dominance (the social and political status of a language), and argues that linguistic dominance is more relevant to the notion of agentivity in cross-linguistic influence. In the Igbo-English contact situation, the dominance relation is basically social — English is the language of prestige and power, a symbol of modernity and westernization, as well as the language of upward socioeconomic mobility.

A prominent feature of the speech of Igbo-English bilinguals is codeswitching/mixing, i.e. the combination of Igbo and English elements in the same discourse, a practice that has been described as "subconscious" (Ahukanna, 1990) and "natural" (Onumajuru, 2007) to Igbo-English bilinguals. Ahukanna (1990: 182) notes that in Igbo-English code-mixing "it is usually Igbo language based speech events that are flooded with English words and expressions and not the other way round." This description of the structure of the utterances recorded in his study corresponds to what has been identified as an insertional pattern of code-mixing, and described by Muysken (2000:7) as involving the "insertion of material (lexical items crentire constituents) into a structure from the other language."

Muysken (2000) further notes that the insertional pattern of code-switching is frequent in colonial settings and in recent migrant communities, and may also signal asymmetry in speakers' proficiency in the two languages (p. 9). Much of the African code-switching data reported in the literature exhibit a dominantly insertional pattern in which the matrix language is an African language (Auer, 1999; Muysken, 2000; Kamwangamalu, 1989b, in Bentahila & Davies, 1998). Although,

Winford (2005) has suggested that "classic codeswitching" (i.e. insertional codeswitching) is an example of borrowing under recipient language agentivity, this study proposes that a predominantly insertional pattern seems to reflect higher proficiency in the African language, i.e. the African language is generally linguistically dominant in African-European language code-switching pairs. This is in spite of the prestige, superior roles and more developmental attention enjoyed by European languages all over sub-Saharan Africa, while African languages are generally marginalised (Adegbija, 1994; Bamgbose, 1991). The assumption that the bilinguals in Ahukanna's (1990) study, and possibly other studies, were linguistically dominant in Igbo suggests that the linguistic outcome would be different if bilinguals are dominant in English.

An observation of the younger generations of Igbo-English bilinguals, especially those in the urban centres or those with greater exposure to and/or use of English by virtue of education, indicates that they are generally unable to speak 'pure' Igbo. Azuonye (2003) has observed generally reduced competence in Igbo and language shift as signs of the endangerment of lgbo. His reference to a generation of "mother-tongue deprived men and women" of Igbo ethnicity would include the younger generation of Igbo-English bilinguals who are relatively linguistically dominant in English. As noted earlier, such bilinguals are able to bring linguistic material (including structure) from the contact language into the native language through their individual practices, the result of which is linguistic variation, i.e. the co-existence of innovative structures modelled on the contact language alongside the original native language patterns.

Syntactic innovation appears most clearly in cases of typological difference between two languages in contact. There are, hypothetically, numerous such areas of difference between Igbo and English. One of them is the categorial non-equivalence of predicate adjectives versus stative verbs between Indo-European and other language groups, including Kwa (Muysken, 2000: 57), as described below.

Predicative adjectives are adjectives that predicate a property of a subject (Stassen, 2013), Adjectives are traditionally said to have two functions, namely attributive and predicative (Radford, 2004), as illustrated in (l) and (2), respectively(Radford, 2004:21):

(l) There is areal crisis.

(2) The crisis is real.

The adjective real is used attributively to modify a following noun in (l) and predicatively to express a feature ofthe subject in (2).

On predicative adjective encoding in the world's languages, Stassen (2013) identifies three patterns, namely:

i. nonverbal encoding of predicative adjectives, as in English _Example (3).

ii. verbal encoding of predicative adjectives, as in Bororo, spoken in Brazil — Example (4).

iii. the mixed type, in which both a verbal and a nonverbal encoding of predicative adjectives is available, as in Luo, spoken in Kenya.

(3) English (Stassen, 2013)

a. John sleep-s

b. John is tall

(4) Bororo (Crowell in Stassen, 2013)

a. i-mago-re
OSG-speak-NEUTRAL)
'I speak/spoke. '

b. i-kure-re
(1SG-ta11-NEUTRAL)
'I am/was tall.'

The examples in (3) indicate that in English the encoding of the predicative adjective (3a) is different from that of the verb (3b) — the English verb sleep shows third person agreement in the present tense while the predicative adjective tall does not (i.e. *John tall-s is unacceptable in English). In Bororo, on the other hand, the predicative adjective kure ('tall') in (4b) is encoded in a way that is parallel to the predicative verb mago ('speak') in (4a), i.e. with (neutral) agreement marking on both the verb and the predicative adjective. Generally, languages with a nonverbal encoding of predicative adjectives have a supportive element (a copula) before the

predicative adjectives, such as is in (3b), while languages with a verbal encoding of predicative adjectives generally have agreement (person/number/gender) marking on the predicative adjectives, as in (4b) (Stassen, 2013).

Igbo does not encode predicative adjectives like English or Bororo, or by using a mixed pattern, like Luo. In fact, the language does not have predicative adjectives. It is generally agreed in the linguistic literature that Igbo has few adjectives (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015; Igwe & Green, 1964; Nwachukwus 1984). A review of the Igbo linguistic literature (1913-2015) by Emenanjo (2015) indicates that the number of adjectives in the language is generally assumed to be less than ten. To make up for "the small number of real adjectives" (Nwachukwu, 1984:81), a number of strategies are employed in the language for expressing adjectival notions. The main strategy is the use of stative verbs (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015; Nwachukwu, 1984); qualifactive nouns and relative clauses are also used (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015).

Stative verbs are used in the following examples to express adjectival notions:

(5) a. O pe-ré mpe. (Emenanjo, 1978: 141)
(he be-IND small)
'He is small.'

(6) a. o lü ilu (Nwachukwu, 1984:85)
(it be bitter) 'It is bitter.'

The "inherent complement verbs" (Nwachukwu, 1984) in (5) and (6)are used to express qualities and states, and are often referred to in the literature as adjectives (as reflected in the glosses). The verbs pe and lu and similar verbs do not, however, correspond to the English verb 'to be', in spite of the glossing. Emenanjo (1978) suggests the gloss "describable in terms of' ('smallness/ bitterness', etc.) for such verbs.

In addition to stative verbs, Igbo has a few descriptive adjectives. However, identifying them on the basis of syntactic criteria has been a matter of much debate in the literature. It has been argued that with the exception of ajQ/ajQQ which always precedes the head noun (Emenanjo, 1978, 2015), Igbo adjectives are generally used

in the attributive function immediately following a noun (or pronoun) (Igwe & Green, 1964; Emenanjo, 1978, 2015); e.g.:

O

(7) bu ihu oma. (Igwe & Green, 1964: 17) (it be face good)

'It is good fortune.'

The verb by in (7) is one of the copula verbs in Igbo (Igwe & Green, 1964; Nwachukwu, 1984); the other two are di and no. The three copula verbs each translate the English verb 'to be', but each verb possesses slightly different syntactic properties (Igwe & Green, 1964; Nwachukwu, 1984). The copula by takes NP complements, as n (7) above, while no incontrovertibly takes prepositional phrase complements.

The point of contention among authors as it relates to adjectives is with espect to "di". Whereas Igwe and Green (1964) and Emenanjo (1978) identify only attributive adjectives in Igbo, and Emenanjo (1978) asserts that any word that can be sed immediately after the verb di (such as mma, ucha and njo) is not an adjective but anominal (his "qualifactive nouns"), Nwachukwu ( 1984) claims that "di occurs with the few Igbo adjectives as its complement and in addition it takes other nominal complements which are single nouns capable of occurring as its only complement" (Swachukwu, 1984:84; italics mine). Nwachukwu (1984), therefore, claims the existence of predicative adjectives in Igbo, although he does not list the adjectives.

What may be concluded from the foregoing is that three major differences exist between Igbo and English in the use of adjectives, namely:

i- A typological difference between Igbo and English is the use of stative verbs in Igbo versus the use of predicative verbs in English.

Igbo uses three different verbs to express the verb 'to be', which, in English, is used to encode predicative adjectives, but is not so used in Igbo.

The class of adjectives in Igbo is a closed syntactic class of very few items, whereas adjectives constitute an open class with a very large membership in English.

In spite of categorial differences between contact languages, borrowing a new category may result from the fact"the borrowing language did not have this category,

and that the bilingual speakers thought it should once they started to appreciate how handy this particular category they had noticed in the contact language would be in their own language (Backus, 2005:317). Muysken (2000:58) adds that mixing could circumvent categorical non-equivalence if "there is an automatic interlingual translation mechanism, triggered by the notional equivalence, so that non-equivalent categories are treated as if they are equivalent." Similarly, De Smit (2006:26, 31) notes that "on the basis of an interlingual identification" (i.e. "perceived (partial) similarity of meaning or function") "between signs A and B, which share a grammatical function a, function b, present in language B but not in A, is transferred to language A as well."

Sometimes structural borrowing results in constructions "in which foreign structure is imported along with a borrowed word" (Backus, 2005:331). This is a type of loan translation or calque known in the literature as "mixed copies" or "loan blends". Backus (2005) points out that motivation for the use of mixed copies is similar to that of lone foreign words, namely they are transparent, easy to use, etc. He also notes that loan translation and structural borrowing are difficult to separate (2010:239).

## Methodology

The method of data collection utilised in this study is participant observation of Igbo-English bilinguals on two university campuses, namely the University of Jos, Nigeria, and the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. The data consist of the spontaneous speech of the participants, who were undergraduate and postgraduate students of both genders, aged between 19 and 45. Such bilinguals were adjudged to have greater exposure to English and to have achieved a high level of proficiency in English, in addition to their knowledge of Igbo. The participants were observed in various types of interaction on campus and a cell phone was used to transcribe segments of the conversations as they occurred.

The recorded data were later transcribed, and the transcripts were scrutinised and classified into unmixed Igbo, unmixed English, code-switched expressions, and

innovative expressions. Expressions identified as innovative in the grammatical system Igbo were isolated for analysis. The innovative expressions were further ciassified and analysed. The analysis revealed three types of innovative structure in the speech of Igbo-English bilinguals. The analysed data are presented as examples z this study in a three-line format. The first line gives the utterance in the form it was recorded; the second line provides the interlinear glossing and the third line, the English translation of the utterance.

Data were also taken from published works for illustrative purposes. Such data are as examples of issues raised in the paper and are duly referenced.

**Data Analysis**

In addition to code-switched expressions, the data contain certain expressions which have resulted from the influence of English and, therefore, constitute syntactic borrowing. This is attributed to the fact that the bilinguals who paticipated in this study have had greater exposure to and/or use of English, the socially dominant language.

The first contact feature relates to the influence of the English predicate adjective construction. An innovative construction recorded in the speech of Igbo English bilinguals consists of di and a simple descriptive English adjective. This construction is very pervasive in the data. The following are examples:

(8) A-di m confused.
(CL-be1 confused)
'I am confused. '

(9) I di shameless.
(you be shameless)
'You are shameless. '

The verb di is also used with comparative adjectives; for example:

(10) Q di-zi kå o di more intelligent than Chikå.

(he be-ES as if he be more intelligent than Chikå) 'It is just as ifhe is more intelligent than Chikå.'

(11) I-so Chukwu di better than i-tinye uché nå mmadu.

(INF-follow God be better than INF-put trust PREP man)

'To follow God is better than to trust man'.

(Onumajuru, 2007:65).

The verb di is further observed occurring with adjectives that are modified by an adverb; e.g.:

(12) Ha di-kwå well loaded.

(they be-ES well loaded) 'They are well loaded.'

(13) Q nå di very happy.

(he say that he be very happy)

'He said that he is very happy.'

Other English adjectives and adjectival expressions used with di in the corpus are: easy, sure, possible, available, qualified, risky, ugly, shameful, dirty, feasible, lucky, straight, small, necessary, good, happy, expensive, responsible, conversant, enough, contagious, too bad, very important, and grossly inadequate. Such English lexical items and expressions are associated with the speech of bilinguals who have attained a high level of proficiency in English, and can hardly be found in the speech of bilinguals with less exposure to, and/or less proficiency in, English.

The use of the ‘di+ English adjective' construction may be attributed to frequencv code-switching with, and lexical borrowing from, English. This is presumably because of the member of adjectives in Igbo. It is noteworthy that although the predicate adjective structure is not attested in Igbo, there is a grammatical function shared by di and the English verb 'to be'(such that the construe s used to form expressions which are translation equivalents e adjectives in English). This makes it possible for the function of encoding (English) predicate adjectives to be transferred to d! in Igbo English bilingual discourse. In other words, bilinguals seem to find an equivalent construction to the English predicative adjective in the construction

initiated by d!, even though di combines with nouns (and not adjectives) in unmixed Igbo, Thus, the innovative use of the 'di + English adjective' construction is modelled on the English predicate adjective construction.

This study notes that the innovative 'di + English adjective' construction is mediated by lexical borrowing and has a high probability of acceptance among Igbo English bilinguals. The fact that adjectives are not used in the predicative function in Igbo, in addition to the seeming handiness of the new expression, leads to structural borrowing as a by-product of lexical borrowing. Lexical borrowing is also the basis for two other innovative constructions identified in the corpus for the study, which are discussed in turn.

Mixed copies or loan blends were also observed in the corpus. These are copied patterns of English expressions in which one of the morphemes comes from English. The following are examples:

(14) Q bia-la on. (it come-PERF on)
'It has come on. '

(15) Kå m ga ease-i-e onwe m.
(let me go ease-V-OVS self my)
'Let me go and ease myself. '

(16) i mean-i-ri ya?
(you mean-V-IND it)
'You mean it?'

Igbo has no structural equivalents of 'come on', 'ease myself/oneself in (14) and (15) or the fixed expression in (16). The use of such expressions by Igbo-English bilinguals indicates that those structures of English have been borrowed into Igbo, along with the words on and ease and mean. The phenomenon of mixed copies is, however, not frequent in the corpus.

Another example of structural innovation that is mediated by lexical borrowing is found with the verb like. English like is so frequent in the corpus that it may be considered an established loan word. Echeruo (2001) gives the Igbo translation of English like as hu n'anya and masi. The Igbo equivalent of love is also given as hu n'anya, which seems to be appropriate, and masi to be a more appropriate

equivalent to like. The Igbo verb masi ('like') is not used in the sequence 'X likes Y' in Igbo. Rather the expression is something like 'Y pleases X', i.e. with a theme or patient subject and an experience object in Igbo, as in (17):

(17) lhe å måsi-ri m
(thing this please-IND me)
'I like this thing. '

In Igbo-English discourse, however, the equivalent of the expression in (17) is a calque on the English verb like, a transitive verb with an experience subject and an accusative theme. The calque contains the borrowed English verb like, making it a mixed copy. The following are examples of the use of like in an Igbo-English mixed copy:

(18) A-like-i-ri
(CL-1ike-V-1ND 1 him/her/it) 'I like him/her/it.'

(19) Ndi igbö nå- å-like i-su igbö.. .(PL Igbo PROG PRT-1ike INF-speak Igbo...) 'The Igbo 's like to speak Igbo...'

The English verb like, seems to have achieved some degree of entrenchment in the Igbo-English bilingual community and to be replacing the equivalent Igbo expression 'masi' (which was not recorded in the corpus for this study) in the speech of Igbo-English bilinguals. This is possibly because the mixed copy with English like is more straight forward and easier to use.

## Conclusion

The study has examined cross-linguistic influence arising from the contact of Igbo with English. It illustrates how innovative structures are introduced into Igbo through the agency of bilingual speakers, especially educated speakers of the younger generation, who have greater exposure to and/or use English more, and are relatively dominant in English. The use of innovative structures alongside original native language patterns results in syntactic variation, as the new structures or features are frequent among English-dominant speakers, while bilinguals who are less proficient in English prefer the original native patterns.

The borrowing of syntactic structure from English into Igbo illustrates linguistic dominance in language contact — even though English is the socially dominant language in the pair, Igbo is dominant in the speech of some Igbo-English bilinguals. Such bilinguals engage in frequent code-switching with, and borrowing from, English. The result is structural innovation that is generally mediated by lexical borrowing, i.e. indirect structural borrowing. Indirect structural borrowing into Igbo is illustrated by the extension in the function of an Igbo copula on the model of the grammar of Igbo, as well as mixed copies or loan blends in which the structure of English is borrowed along with an English word.

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