Mother Tongue Interference in English Pronunciation: A Study of Phonological Transfer from some Indigenous Nigerian Languages

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Abstract

This article investigates the influence of some indigenous Nigerian languages on the pronunciation of English, riveting on phonological interference among bilingual speakers across ethnic groups including Ibibio, Idoma, Yoruba, and Hausa. Drawing on recent empirical studies and linguistic analyses, it surveys how segmental features (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation) are shaped by native phonological systems, resulting in distinctive pronunciation patterns in Nigerian English. The research highlights that phonological transfer is not merely an interim phase in second language acquisition but a deeply entrenched cognitive and linguistic phenomenon that persists even among highly educated bilinguals. The study shows that Ibibio speakers struggle with English vowels and stress patterns due to tonal reliance in their native language, leading to flattened prosody and reduced intelligibility. Idoma speakers exhibit assimilation, elision, and vowel substitution, often simplifying English syllable structures and misarticulating consonant clusters. Yoruba speakers transfer tonal contours and syllable-timed rhythm into English, neutralizing vowel distinctions and altering stress placement. Hausa speakers, traditionally substituting interdental fricatives with stops, now show a socio-phonetic shift toward fricative approximations among educated speakers, reflecting dynamic adaptation influenced by education and media exposure. The article calls for a paradigm shift in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria, advocates for contrastive phonological instruction, suprasegmental training, and culturally responsive pedagogy. It critiques the inadequacy of Received Pronunciation (RP)-based models and emphasizes the need to recognize Nigerian English as a legitimate, evolving variety. By synthesizing findings across ethnic and linguistic lines, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of bilingual phonological transfer and offers practical recommendations for inclusive and effective language education in Nigeria's multilingual context.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Interference pronunciation, Phonological Transfer, Indigenous Nigerian Languages

Introduction

In multilingual societies like Nigeria, the acquisition of pronunciation of English is influenced by the phonological systems of indigenous languages. English, though widely used in education,

governance, and media, is often learned in environments where native tongues dominate daily communication. This linguistic coexistence fosters a phenomenon known as language interference or phonological transfer, wherein features from a speaker's first language (L1) unconsciously shape their production of a second language (L2) in this case, English.

The impact of indigenous phonologies on English pronunciation is both segmental and suprasegmental. Segmental interference includes substitution, omission, or misarticulation of vowels and consonants not present in the native language. Suprasegmental interference, on the other hand, involves the transfer of tonal patterns, syllable timing, and rhythm, which often conflict with English's stress-timed prosody. These influences result in distinctive pronunciation patterns that contribute to the widely recognized "Nigerian accent."

Recent studies have provided empirical evidence of this phenomenon across various ethnic groups. For instance, Edem (2024) highlights the challenges Ibibio speakers face in mastering English vowels and stress patterns due to tonal reliance in Ibibio. Isa and Yakubu (2023) document how Idoma phonological processes such as assimilation and elision lead to systematic deviations in English speech. Yoruba speakers, as shown by Oloko and Yusuff (2025), transfer tonal contours and syllable-timed rhythm into English, resulting in prosodic flattening. Similarly, Hausa speakers exhibit phonemic substitutions that evolve with education and exposure, as explored by Sale (2025).

These patterns are not indicative of linguistic deficiency but rather reflect deep-seated cognitive and phonotactic habits. Even among highly educated bilinguals, phonological transfer persists, influencing not only spoken English but also orthographic practices. The implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria are significant, demanding a shift from prescriptive pronunciation models to contrastive, culturally responsive pedagogy.

This article synthesizes recent studies on indigenous language interference in English pronunciation across Nigeria. It aims to illuminate the linguistic, cognitive, and educational dimensions of this phenomenon, offering insights into how phonological transfer shapes Nigerian English and proposing pedagogical strategies for more inclusive and effective language instruction.

Literature Review

The influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on English pronunciation has been a focal point of sociophonetic and pedagogical inquiry, with recent scholarship offering nuanced insights into how native phonological systems shape second language articulation. This literature review synthesizes studies that examine phonological interference across some Nigerian languages Ibibio, Idoma, Yoruba, and Hausa highlighting both segmental and suprasegmental dimensions of transfer.

Edem (2024) provides a foundational analysis of mother tongue interference among Ibibio-speaking students, identifying significant challenges in the articulation of English vowels such as /i:/, /e/, and /ɜ:/, which are either absent or differently realized in Ibibio. The study also underscores the impact of Ibibio's tonal structure on English prosody, noting a tendency to flatten stress patterns and apply pitch-based intonation, which compromises intelligibility in

connected speech. These findings affirm the need for targeted phonetic instruction that addresses both vowel recognition and rhythmic training.

Isa and Yakubu (2023) explore how some Idoma phonological processes assimilation, elision, and vowel preservation affect English pronunciation. Their research reveals that Idoma speakers often simplify consonant clusters (e.g., /nt/ → /n/, /sp/ → /p/) and resist vowel reduction, leading to unnatural stress patterns and syllable restructuring. The authors argue that these deviations stem from deeply embedded phonotactic constraints and cognitive habits, necessitating contrastive phonology and auditory discrimination exercises in ELT.

Multiple studies have examined Yoruba's influence on English pronunciation. Oloko and Yusuff (2025) conduct a contrastive analysis showing how Yoruba's syllable-timed rhythm and tonal contours interfere with English stress-timed prosody. Bankole (2022) and Olaogun (2025) extend this inquiry to educated Yoruba-English bilinguals, demonstrating that phonological interference persists despite high literacy level and formal instruction. These speakers exhibit allophonic variation, morphophonemic restructuring, and orthographic habits that mirror Yoruba phonotactics. The research challenges assumptions about bilingual convergence and highlights the resilience of L1 phonology.

Sale (2025) investigates Hausa-English interference, noting that Hausa speakers traditionally substitute English interdental fricatives (/θ/, /ð/) with stops (/t/, /d/). However, a socio-phonetic shift is observed among educated speakers who increasingly use /s/ and /z/ as approximations, reflecting a dynamic adaptation influenced by education, media exposure, and urbanization. This evolution underscores the fluidity of phonological transfer and the role of sociolinguistic factors in shaping pronunciation norms.

Oluranti (2025) and Amoniyan (2025) offer a cross-ethnic perspective on vowel shifts in Nigerian English. Oluranti documents how speakers from Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Fulani backgrounds exhibit distinct vowel realizations based on their native phonemic inventories. Amoniyan's spectral analysis reveals a convergence toward intermediate formant values among urban speakers, suggesting the emergence of a pan-Nigerian English phonology. These studies emphasize the interplay between linguistic heritage and social mobility in shaping vowel articulation.

Additional research by Osisanwo, Aina, and Bolaji examines how Yoruba phonological rules reshape borrowed English nouns, while studies on Urhobo-English contact reveal phonemic adaptation of English features into indigenous languages. These findings illustrate bidirectional influence and reinforce the argument that phonological transfer is not limited to second-language acquisition but extends into language contact and lexical integration.

Collectively, these studies advocate for a rethinking of pronunciation pedagogy in Nigeria. Traditional models based on Received Pronunciation (RP) are deemed insufficient in a multilingual context. Scholars recommend contrastive drills tailored to L1 backgrounds, suprasegmental training using Nigerian English prosody, and teacher education programs that incorporate linguistic diversity and empathy. The literature converges on the view that Nigerian English is a legitimate, evolving variety shaped by indigenous phonologies and sociocultural dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the interdisciplinary theories of phonological transfer, contact linguistics, and sociophonetics, which collectively provide a lens for understanding how indigenous Nigerian languages influence English pronunciation. These frameworks help explain the cognitive, linguistic, and social mechanisms underlying second language speech production in multilingual contexts.

Phonological Transfer Theory

At the core of this investigation is the theory of phonological transfer, which posits that the phonetic and phonotactic rules of a speaker's first language (L1) are unconsciously applied to the second language (L2), especially during early stages of acquisition. This transfer manifests in segmental features such as vowel and consonant substitutions and suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. Studies cited in the document (e.g., Edem, 2024; Isa & Yakubu, 2023) demonstrate that Ibibio and Idoma speakers exhibit systematic deviations in English pronunciation due to the structural constraints of their native phonologies. These deviations are not random errors but predictable outcomes of L1 influence.

Contact Linguistics

The framework of contact linguistics further illuminates the bidirectional influence between English and indigenous Nigerian languages. As languages interact within a multilingual society, phonological features are borrowed, adapted, and restructured. For example, Yoruba-English bilinguals not only transfer tonal contours into English speech but also reshape English lexical items when borrowed into Yoruba (Osisanwo et al., 2025). This dynamic exchange reflects the fluid boundaries between languages in contact and supports the notion of hybrid phonetic systems emerging in Nigerian English.

Sociophonetics And Identity

Sociophonetic theory provides a critical dimension by linking pronunciation patterns to social identity, education, and linguistic prestige. The document highlights how educated Hausa speakers shift from traditional substitutions (/θ/ → /t/, /ð/ → /d/) to more socially acceptable approximations (/θ/ → /s/, /ð/ → /z/) (Sale, 2025). This shift illustrates how phonological choices are influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as urbanization, media exposure, and perceived norms of intelligibility. Moreover, the persistence of L1 phonological habits among highly literate Yoruba-English bilinguals (Bankole, 2022; Olaogun, 2025) challenges the assumption that formal education leads to convergence with native English norms. Instead, it affirms the cognitive entrenchment of L1 phonology and its role in shaping bilingual speech.

Suprasegmental Transfer And Prosodic Interference

The suprasegmental dimension—encompassing tone, stress, rhythm, and intonation—is particularly salient in this study. Indigenous languages like Yoruba and Ibibio are tonal and syllable-timed, whereas English is stress-timed. The mismatch leads to prosodic interference, where pitch variations replace stress patterns, resulting in flattened intonation and reduced intelligibility. This phenomenon is not merely phonetic but reflects deeper cognitive and cultural orientations toward speech rhythm and emphasis.

Multilingualism and Layered Interference

Finally, the framework acknowledges Nigeria's complex multilingual landscape, where speakers often acquire English after mastering one or more indigenous languages. This layered

linguistic background contributes to compounded interference, as multiple phonological systems interact with English. The NaijaNLP survey (2025) underscores the underrepresentation of major Nigerian languages in computational modeling, further complicating efforts to address pronunciation challenges through technology.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust foundation for analyzing the influence of indigenous languages on English pronunciation in Nigeria. They guide the interpretation of empirical findings and inform pedagogical strategies aimed at fostering intelligibility while respecting linguistic identity. Let me know if you'd like help drafting the Methodology section next.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative synthesis of recent empirical studies that examine the influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on English pronunciation. The methodology integrates findings from multiple linguistic investigations conducted between 2022 and 2025, focusing on phonological interference among speakers of Ibibio, Idoma, Yoruba, and Hausa. The approach is comparative and contrastive, aiming to identify recurring patterns of segmental and suprasegmental transfer across ethnic groups and educational contexts.

The studies reviewed diverse populations, including:

- Secondary and tertiary students from Ibibio, Idoma, Yoruba, and Hausa-speaking regions
- Educated bilinguals with formal training in English
- Urban and rural speakers with varying degrees of exposure to native English models

Amoniyan's spectral analysis, for instance, included 75 speakers from Western, Eastern, and Northern Nigeria, ensuring broad geographic and linguistic coverage

Data were extracted from:

- Phonetic transcriptions and acoustic analyses of English speech by Nigerian bilinguals
- Observational studies of classroom pronunciation practices
- Interviews and surveys with students and educators
- Spectral tracking of vowel formants across ethnic groups
- Orthographic samples from informal writing (e.g., texting, social media)

These data sources provided insight into both spoken and written manifestations of phonological interference.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by contrastive phonology and sociophonetic theory. Segmental features (vowel and consonant articulation) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation) were examined in relation to the phonotactic constraints of each indigenous language. Patterns of substitution, elision, assimilation, and syllable restructuring were identified and compared across studies.

Additionally, sociolinguistic variables—such as education level, urbanization, and media exposure—were considered to understand how social factors mediate phonological transfer.

Limitations

While the synthesis draws on robust studies, it is limited by the availability of phonological data for under-researched languages such as Fulani and Igbo. Furthermore, the

absence of longitudinal data restricts insights into how phonological interference evolves over time with increased English exposure.

Results And Findings

This study synthesizes phonological data and socio-linguistic observations from multiple Nigerian ethnic groups to reveal how indigenous languages influence English pronunciation. The findings are organized by linguistic features and ethnic contexts, highlighting both segmental and suprasegmental interference patterns.

Segmental Interference

Vowel Substitution and articulation

- Ibibio speakers struggle with English vowels such as /i:/, /e/, and /ɜ:/, which are absent or differently realized in Ibibio (Edem, 2024).
- Idoma speakers substitute English vowels with native equivalents, leading to mispronunciations like "cut" → "cot" and "bit" → "beat" (Isa & Yakubu, 2023).
- Yoruba speakers neutralize vowel distinctions (e.g., /i:/ vs /ɪ/, /æ/ vs /ʌ/), resulting in homophony (e.g., "ship" and "sheep" sounding alike).
- Hausa speakers avoid central vowels and substitute unfamiliar ones with more fronted or backed alternatives (Oluranti, 2025).

Consonant Simplification and Substitution

- Voiced and voiceless contrasts such as /θ/ vs /t/ and /ð/ vs /d/ are often neutralized across Ibibio, Yoruba, and Hausa speakers.
- Yoruba and Hausa speakers simplify consonant clusters (e.g., "school" → "suku", "desk" → "des"), often inserting epenthetic vowels.
- Educated Hausa speakers increasingly substitute /θ/ and /ð/ with /s/ and /z/, reflecting a socio-phonetic shift (Sale, 2025).

Suprasegmental Interference

Stress and Rhythm Transfer

- Ibibio and Yoruba speakers apply syllable-timed rhythm to English, flattening stress contours and reducing prosodic contrast.
- Yoruba-English bilinguals often give equal prominence to all syllables or apply tonal contours in place of stress, deviating from native-like English prosody (Oloko & Yusuff, 2025; Olaogun, 2025).

Tone-Like Intonation

- Tonal languages such as Yoruba and Ibibio transfer pitch-based intonation to English, affecting sentence-level stress and emphasis.
- This tonal imprinting persists even among highly educated bilinguals, suggesting deep cognitive entrenchment of L1 prosody.

Cognitive And Orthographic Consequences

- Phonological interference increases cognitive load during speech production, leading to slower speech rates and hesitations.

- Educated Yoruba-English bilinguals reflect their speech patterns in writing through unconventional spelling and punctuation that mimic tonal emphasis (Olaogun, 2025).

Cross-Ethnic Vowel Shifts And Convergence

- Oluranti (2025) and Amoniyan (2025) document vowel shifts across Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and Fulani speakers, showing distinct realizations based on native phonemic inventories.

- Amoniyan's spectral analysis reveals convergence toward intermediate formant values among urban speakers, suggesting the emergence of a pan-Nigerian English phonology.

Language Mixing And Code-Switching

- Nigerian speakers often engage in code-switching between English, indigenous languages, and Pidgin, which reinforces localized phonetic norms.

- Borrowed English words are frequently pronounced with native accents, contributing to hybrid phonetic systems.

Persistent Interference Among Educated Speakers

- Bankole (2022) and Olaogun (2025) show that even fluent, literate Yoruba-English bilinguals retain L1 phonological habits in both speech and writing.
- Morphophonemic restructuring of English morphemes (e.g., -ed, -s) aligns with Yoruba syllable templates, indicating phonological resilience.

These findings collectively demonstrate that indigenous phonological systems exert a persistent and multifaceted influence on English pronunciation in Nigeria. The interference is not merely transitional but reflects deep-seated linguistic identity, cognitive processing, and sociolinguistic adaptation. Let me know if you'd like help drafting the Discussion section next.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the profound and persistent influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on the pronunciation of English, revealing a complex interplay between linguistic structure, cognitive processing, and sociocultural identity. The phenomenon of phonological transfer is not merely a transitional phase in second language acquisition but a deeply rooted feature of bilingual speech, shaped by the phonotactic constraints and prosodic norms of the speaker's first language (L1).

Segmental And Suprasegmental Transfer

Across ethnic groups, segmental interference manifests in predictable patterns of vowel and consonant substitution. Ibibio and Idoma speakers, for instance, exhibit difficulty with English vowels not present in their native inventories, leading to misarticulations that affect intelligibility. Yoruba and Hausa speakers simplify consonant clusters and substitute unfamiliar phonemes with native approximations, often resulting in homophony and reduced clarity. These

patterns reflect the structural limitations of indigenous phonologies and the unconscious application of native articulatory habits to English.

Suprasegmental features stress, rhythm, and intonation are equally affected. Tonal languages like Yoruba and Ibibio transfer pitch-based contours into English, flattening its stress-timed rhythm and altering prosodic emphasis. Even among educated bilinguals, tonal imprinting persists, suggesting that suprasegmental interference is cognitively entrenched and resistant to erosion through formal instruction or exposure to native English models.

Cognitive Load and Orthographic Consequences

The cognitive demands of managing phonological interference are evident in increased speech monitoring, slower rates, and hesitations. Speakers must navigate between conflicting phonological systems, which can detract from fluency and spontaneity. Moreover, the influence of L1 phonology extends into orthographic practices, particularly among Yoruba-English bilinguals, who reflect tonal speech patterns in informal writing through unconventional punctuation and syllabification. This indicates that phonological habits are not confined to oral production but permeate literacy behaviors.

Sociolinguistic Dynamics And Identity

The evolution of pronunciation patterns among Hausa speakers illustrates the role of sociolinguistic factors in shaping phonological transfer. Educated speakers increasingly adopt fricative approximations (/s/, /z/) in place of traditional stop substitutions (/t/, /d/), reflecting a shift toward perceived prestige norms. This adaptation highlights how language use is mediated by social expectations, education, and media exposure. Similarly, vowel convergence across ethnic groups in urban centers suggests the emergence of a pan-Nigerian English phonology, driven by interethnic communication and globalization.

Importantly, these patterns are not indicative of linguistic deficiency but of phonological resilience and innovation. Nigerian English is a dynamic, adaptive variety that reflects the country's multilingual reality and engagement with global English norms. The persistence of L1 influence—even among highly proficient speakers—challenges the assumption that bilingualism leads to phonological convergence and calls for a more nuanced understanding of bilingual speech.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings have significant implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria. Traditional pronunciation models based on Received Pronunciation (RP) are inadequate in addressing the diverse phonological backgrounds of Nigerian learners. Instead, a contrastive and culturally responsive approach is needed—one that incorporates L1 phonology into instruction, emphasizes suprasegmental training, and validates the linguistic identity of learners.- Educators must be equipped to recognize and address phonological transfer not as error correction but as a process of linguistic negotiation. Teaching strategies should include minimal pair drills, intonation mapping, and formant-based listening exercises tailored to specific L1

profiles. Teacher education programs must also integrate training in Nigerian phonology and sociolinguistic awareness to foster empathy and effectiveness in pronunciation instruction.

Conclusion

The influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on the pronunciation of English is a multifaceted and deeply entrenched phenomenon that reflects the country's rich linguistic diversity and complex sociolinguistic landscape. This study has synthesized findings from a wide range of recent research to demonstrate how phonological transfer—both segmental and suprasegmental—shapes the spoken English of Nigerian bilinguals across ethnic groups, including Ibibio, Idoma, Yoruba, and Hausa. The evidence presented affirms that pronunciation challenges are not merely technical errors but manifestations of cognitive entrenchment, phonotactic constraints, and linguistic identity.

Segmental interference, such as vowel substitution and consonant simplification, arises from the absence or variation of English phonemes in indigenous languages. For example, Ibibio and Idoma speakers struggle with English vowels like /iː/ and /ɜː/, while Yoruba and Hausa speakers often neutralize distinctions and simplify clusters due to limited native inventories. These substitutions affect intelligibility and fluency, particularly in academic and formal contexts. Suprasegmental interference—such as the transfer of tonal contours, syllable-timed rhythm, and flattened stress patterns—further complicates pronunciation, leading to prosodic deviations that persist even among highly educated speakers.

Importantly, the persistence of these patterns across literacy levels and educational attainment challenges the assumption that exposure to English automatically leads to native-like pronunciation. Studies on Yoruba-English bilinguals reveal that tonal imprinting and syllabic restructuring remain stable despite years of formal instruction, professional use, and even orthographic adaptation in informal writing. Similarly, Hausa-English speakers exhibit evolving substitution strategies influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as education, urbanization, and media exposure, indicating that phonological transfer is dynamic and socially mediated.

The cumulative effect of these influences is the emergence of a localized Nigerian English accent—one that blends native phonological norms with English structures in a hybrid system. This accent is not a deviation from standard English but a legitimate variety shaped by Nigeria's multilingual reality. The emergence of pan-Nigerian vowel shifts, as documented by Oluranti and Amoniyan, further supports the notion of a converging phonological norm that transcends ethnic boundaries while retaining traces of indigenous heritage.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings demand a fundamental rethinking of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria. Traditional models based on Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American English are insufficient and often counterproductive in a context where learners bring diverse phonological backgrounds to the classroom. Instead, educators must adopt contrastive phonology approaches that explicitly address L1-L2 differences, incorporate suprasegmental training, and foster sociolinguistic awareness. Teacher education programs must be restructured to include training in Nigerian phonology, linguistic empathy, and culturally responsive instruction.

Moreover, the recognition of Nigerian English as a dynamic and evolving variety has broader implications for linguistic theory, language policy, and identity formation. It challenges prescriptive norms and affirms the legitimacy of localized speech patterns. By embracing phonological pluralism, educators and linguists can support learners in achieving intelligibility and confidence without erasing their linguistic identities.

In conclusion, the influence of indigenous languages on English pronunciation in Nigeria is not a barrier to be overcome but a resource to be understood and integrated into language education. It reflects the cognitive, cultural, and communicative realities of Nigerian speakers and offers a rich terrain for linguistic innovation and pedagogical transformation. Future research should continue to explore underrepresented languages, longitudinal patterns of phonological adaptation, and the role of technology in modeling and supporting pronunciation in multilingual contexts. Only through such inclusive and context-sensitive approaches can ELT in Nigeria fulfill its promise of empowering learners and honoring the nation's linguistic heritage.

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