

“Me too”: A Sociolinguistic Assessment of Zimbabwean English

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Abstract: *The question whether the variety of English used in Zimbabwe is indeed a legitimate new English, a standard variety of English, or a mere learner language crying out: “Me too!” (Bruthiaux 2003) in order to be recognised as indeed a new variety of English, eligible to join the ranks of other institutionalised new Englishes remains unresolved to date and therefore interesting. A number of criteria to address this question have been used e.g. see Magura (1984) Makoni (1993), Mlambo (2009) among others. This paper uses Mollin’s (2007) model that features processes of functional expansion, nativisation and institutionalisation, to address the variety status question of ‘Zimbabwean English’. It emerges from a systematic analysis of Zimbabwean English against Mollin’s three point model that Zimbabwean English is at the threshold of becoming an institutionalised variety of English since it satisfies two out of three criteria i.e. expansion in function and nativisation of form. However, the fact that there are no internal norms governing the variety and that speakers of this new English are somewhat ambivalent in terms of their attitudes towards the new variety bars Zimbabwean English from passing the institutionalisation aspect of the test.*

Key words: *Zimbabwean English, new English, variety status, functional expansion, nativisation, institutionalisation*

Introduction

The global spread of the English language and the consequent presence of the language across the world has seen new varieties of English sprouting in the different polities of the world competing to be counted as autonomous varieties of English, known as new Englishes, world Englishes or global Englishes (Schneider 2003:234) with norms that pay no allegiance to standard forms of British and American English, by and large. It is this competition that Bruthiaux (2003) refers to as the “me too” bandwagon – a tendency for new varieties of English to present themselves for consideration as legitimate varieties of English. Mollin (2007:168) argues that this pressure from Englishes across the world for consideration as new Englishes behoves scholars to come up with a working criterion to act as some form of jury to determine which varieties qualify and which do not. Furthermore, it also makes it necessary for each of the candidate varieties to be adequately explored both linguistically and sociolinguistically prior to a determination.

Not that there is much to be gained out of a polity’s variety being designated a legitimate new English beyond the expression of sociolinguistic identity and ‘linguistic sovereignty’. Schneider

(2003:234) observes that the process of the birth of new Englishes “is driven by identity reconstructions by the parties involved...” Collating key ideas from previous new Englishes literature (such as work by Schmied 1991, Kachru 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1996, Schneider 2003, Bolton 2003, among others, Mollin (2007) suggests a three point criterion against which any new English about which there is some dispute on variety status can be analysed. The criteria include questions of functional expansion, nativisation of forms and institutionalisation of variety. (Of course there are other criteria suggested by Terblanche and Van Rooy 2006, Van Rooy 2006 etc) but Mollin’s criteria have been found to be a comprehensive and more appropriate tool with which to assess the variety status of the English used in Zimbabwe).

As a ‘lesser-known variety of English’ (Schreier 2009) extant literature on Zimbabwean English demonstrates that there is disagreement on the variety status of this variety. Relying largely on sociolinguistic conjecture and introspection Ngaru (1977, 1982), Mlambo (2009) rule that there are features of Zimbabwean English that build a compelling case for it to be regarded as a new variety of English. Using a more scientific linguistic/structural approach in which he examines the sociophonological aspects of the English spoken by Zimbabweans Kadenge (2010) similarly argues that Zimbabwean English is indeed a new variety of English. He concludes his study with the observation that “based on the sociolinguistic status and localised phonological features of the English that is spoken in Zimbabwe, this study concludes that this distinct variety of English is legitimately ‘owned’ by Zimbabweans” (Kadenge 2010:47).

On the other hand there are scholars like Makoni (1993) who conclude, also from a sociolinguistic perspective that the English spoken in Zimbabwe is not a new variety of English arguing that its norms depend on those of Standard English and that it is also largely acquired through the education system, though it tends to have localised features and is used in a wide range of purposes such as letter-writing, parliamentary debates, creative writing, among other purposes.

Controversy over the variety status of Zimbabwean English is not only found among Zimbabwean scholars. For example, scholars such as Schreir (2009) and Fitzmaurice (2009) classify Zimbabwean English as belonging to the outer circle but Braj Kachru has consistently maintained that English in Zimbabwe belongs to the expanding circle (see Kachru 1988, 1990 and 1996). This lack of consensus among scholars to some extent further confirms the embryonic state of research on English in Zimbabwe. Of course the development of new Englishes is dynamic, with a single variety at one moment configuring as an extending circle variety (EFL) and at another as an outer circle variety (ESL) but the indeterminacy of the status of English in Zimbabwe seems not to be one that can be adequately explained through the dynamism question alone. It is such controversy that makes the question of the variety status of English in Zimbabwe an interesting question. The sections below discuss Zimbabwean English in terms of Mollin’s (2007) criteria of functional expansion, nativisation of forms and institutionalisation of variety.

Zimbabwean English and the functional expansion question

Mollin (2007:170) conceptualises expansion as involving widespread use of a variety or use of the language in the many different domains of the community and goes on to argue that it is this pervasive use that guarantees the development of a unique language variety. Mollin adds that unique varieties also develop as a result of the use of a language in lingua franca settings where speakers of different national languages have an inevitable need to communicate with each other, as well as widespread bilingualism in a community.

A sociolinguistic domain analysis of English in the context of Zimbabwe demonstrates that the criteria just described all obtain convincingly in Zimbabwe. Firstly, that English is used across almost all sectors of the country's life is beyond doubt (Hungwe 2007, Makanda 2009, Ndhlovu 2010, Magwa 2010, Kadenge and Nkomo 2011, Kadodo *et al* 2012, Nhongo 2013, Kadenge and Mugari 2015, and Nkwe and Marungudzi 2015). English is used in government administration, in parliament, in the courts, in the media, in education and in science and technology. There is no other language with similar widespread use in Zimbabwe. Not to say that the indigenous languages of Zimbabwe are not used in these sectors. They are indeed used but largely in off-record and mainly informal situations. Makanda (2009) did a comprehensive study of language use patterns in Zimbabwe and his study shows that there are areas that are indeed dominated by indigenous languages such as Ndebele and Shona, namely at home, on first encounter with strangers and when talking with neighbours as well as at the workplace. It is this diglossic asymmetry in the distribution of functions that further marginalises indigenous languages as they are not used in spheres of importance such as government administration, commerce, law, education, media, science and technology.

As far as the law and education sectors are concerned Makanda (2009) and Kadenge and Nkomo (2011:252) observe that there are actually policies derived from the national constitution that overtly officialise the use of English. In terms of education, the 1987, 1996 and 2006 (amended) education policies, expressly state that English should be used as a language of instruction from the fourth grade (before 2006) and from Form One (after 2006). Even at tertiary level, all education is conducted through the medium of English except in African Languages departments, and still not in all tertiary institutions at that!

In terms of the law, Chapter 8 Sections 177-179 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe state that judges of all courts of law except one (the customary court) should have trained in Roman-Dutch law or should have trained or practised in a country in which English has official recognition. It can be surmised from this provision that English plays a prominent role in the legal affairs of Zimbabwe. This agrees with Makanda (2009)'s observation that sections of the magistrate, high and supreme courts act expressly state that English is the language to be used in court proceedings and that where defendants or any other party interested in court proceedings are not proficient in English, then they would have recourse to the services of an interpreter.

It should be emphasised here that once a language is given a prominent role in education as well as law, it follows that other sectors such as science and technology, business, media among others will inevitably follow suit. This will, as noted above, have a detrimental effect on the indigenous languages which will now be viewed as having no material capital at all, thus being eventually viewed negatively by their potential learners and users, a point clearly made by Marungudzi *et al* (2014: 21). This of course has the largely ‘undesirable’ effect of trapping the indigenous languages in a perpetual cycle of disuse and stigma.

That other sectors have indeed followed suit in terms of adopting the use of English in the context of Zimbabwe is evident in the persistent scenarios in the media and in science and technology. As far as the use of English in the media is concerned, it is clear that out of more than 15 print newspaper publications in Zimbabwe, only two, *Kwayedza* and *Umthunywa* publish in indigenous languages and these are weeklies, in contrast to most of those in English which are dailies. The *Masvingo Star*, a community newspaper for Masvingo Province is also introducing Shangani/XiTsonga pages to its newspaper, but this is an almost insignificant counterbalance to the dominance of English. The story is not different in the electronic media where a majority of television and radio stations as well as online news websites broadcast in English. Out of the four public radio stations in the country, two i.e. Radio Zimbabwe and National FM, broadcast in indigenous languages, switching to English programming when there are important national events such as Presidential addresses (see Makanda 2009, Magwa 2010, Ndhlovu 2010, Kadodo *et al* 2012, Makanda 2013). Private stations such as ZiFM Stereo, Diamond FM and YaFM also largely broadcast in English.

As for language use in the business, Makanda (2009) is of the view that the language used depends on the location of the business but results from his study indicated that in almost all provinces, English was reported to be the most widely used language though the combined percentage of Shona and Ndebele was always higher than that of English. Makanda (2009:109) also concedes that “in industry and commerce on the other hand, the need to be ‘very formal’ is very high hence employees of any organisation have an inclination to communicating with the customers in English unless and until the clients resort to an indigenous language. For this reason one finds that English has got a high usage in business circles”.

In terms of science and technology, it is important to note that Zimbabwe has not originated any significant science and technology products, relying mainly on technology from countries such as Britain, the US, Italy and of late from China and India. Thus it follows that instruction manuals on how these science and technology products should be operated and managed are largely in the language of the manufacturing countries or English is used as a default language in those manuals. Furthermore most of such products also bear non-indigenous names e.g. thermometer, computer, software, nebuliser, dialysis machine etc. and such terms are not easily translatable into indigenous languages. The presence and visibility of Zimbabwe’s indigenous languages on the worldwide web also remain very insignificant in comparison with English.

As pointed out earlier, it is such widespread functions that inevitably lead to the development of unique features and eventually the birth of a new variety of English. Against the background where almost all the national affairs of the country are conducted in English, it can be concluded that in terms of functional expansion, Zimbabwean English is clearly a new variety of English.

Notwithstanding the clear functional dominance of English, the new Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) has attempted to create a façade that some sixteen languages (namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa) spoken in the country (clearly not all the languages) are now ‘officially recognised languages’, whatever that means! However, this has not detracted from the dominance of the English language, giving credence to Kadenge and Mugari’s (2015:23) incisive observation that most language policies in Africa are nothing more than “declarations of intent that have little functional use beyond political symbolism”.

In fact, provisions in Section 1 (6) and 4(63) of The Constitution of Zimbabwe have been roundly criticised for a myriad of loopholes and recommendations to plug these proffered. Some of the loopholes include the fact that Section 1 (6) just lists sixteen languages as officially recognised languages without spelling out the “modalities, methodologies and rationale used to come up with the list” (Kadenge and Mugari 2015: 26), that the functional domains to which each of these languages can be applied are not specified and that the declaration is not accompanied by a practical implementation agenda. The authors also note that these two sections of the constitution are also self-contradictory.

Secondly it is also the case in the context of Zimbabwe that there is widespread bilingualism and multilingualism. In fact there are very few cases of absolute monolinguals in Zimbabwe which boasts a literacy rate of over 92%. This is due to the fact that, thanks to the consistently bilingual inclination of its language-in-education policy, all literate citizens of Zimbabwe are bound to know more than one language, one of the languages being inevitably English. Therefore there is a very much pronounced prevalence of English-Indigenous language bilingualism. Multilingualism is most pronounced in those parts of the country e.g. Chiredzi, Beitbridge, Hwange, Binga, Tsholotsho, etc dominated by minority languages, where in addition to the minority language, English as well as one of the previously so-called national majority languages such as Shona or Ndebele is used as a language of wider communication.

However, in terms of the spread of English through lingua franca settings, this certainly has a very minimal effect the reason being that one of the so-called majority languages of Zimbabwe i.e. Shona and Ndebele compete for the role of lingua franca with English to such an extent that even in urban settings, speakers of the so-called minority languages are likely to communicate with other speakers in either Shona or Ndebele since these are languages of wider communication in Zimbabwe. However, the fact remains that the use of English in lingua franca settings as a factor of the development of Zimbabwean English cannot be totally discounted.

Zimbabwean English and the nativisation question

According to Kachru (1992b:235) nativisation refers to the “linguistic readjustment a language undergoes when it is used by members of another speech community in distinctive sociocultural contexts and language contact situations”. The process of nativisation is also alternatively known as indigenisation or localisation. This process normally results from mother tongue language transfer, accommodation and typological constraints (Mollin 2007:171). Nativisation normally occurs at all levels of language i.e. phonology, lexicon, grammar and discourse, a point echoed by Schneider (2003) when he observes that nativisation occurs at the lexical, syntactic, stylistic, discursal and genre levels. Differences’ from the native standard in these realms also need to be considerable. The new features should also be systematic. Schneider (2003:247) argues that this is the third phase of a five-phase dynamic model of the evolution of new Englishes and that it is the most vibrant one, “the central phase of both cultural and linguistic transformation”.

Measured against this criterion, Zimbabwean English may be said to be approaching new variety status. Though the question of nativisation has not so far been adequately explored owing to the embryonic nature of research on Zimbabwean English, as indicated earlier, studies have shown that there are some characteristics of the language variety that are typically nativised, particularly at the phonological novel (see Ngara 1977; 1982, Magura 1985, Schmied 1996, Mlambo 2009, and Kadenge 2010).

Furthermore, preliminary results based on a more recent corpus-based research into the nature of Zimbabwean English conducted by this author (Marungudzi forthcoming) also show that there is a significant level of nativisation in the variety. In specific terms the results show nativisation evident in such features as use of inversion in indirect questions, extension of the progressive aspect to habitual contexts, extension of the progressive aspect to stative verbs, use of resumptive pronouns, non-standard use of coordinate sentence patterns, among others. These are mainly syntactic features but there are also myriads of lexical and phonological items that evince nativisation. Similar features have also been reported in other new Englishes in Africa and elsewhere in the world. So it would be reasonable to argue that Zimbabwean English on this score is indeed a new form of English.

The corpus-based study by Marungudzi also indicated that nativisation was also most pronounced in the spoken mode of the corpus as compared to the written mode. However, though nativisation was witnessed in the Zimbabwean variety of English, its extent does not approximate the extent of nativisation reported in other new Englishes such as those of West Africa and East Africa. However, one of the reasons for this could be that English is scarcely used in informal contexts in Zimbabwe and also that, as noted by Makoni (1993), the variety of English used in Zimbabwe has been mainly learned through education and not through naturalistic contexts where nativisation would be more likely.

Zimbabwean English and the institutionalisation question

Institutionalisation according to Mollin (2007) has to do with the attitudes of the speakers of the new English towards it, levels of acceptability of the new variety as well as the general reaction of the elite to nativised structures in the new variety. Institutionalisation can therefore be understood as some sort of standardisation of the new features and can be equated to what Schneider (2003:249) refers to as endonormative stabilisation, which he views as “marked by the gradual adoption and acceptance of an indigenous linguistic norm, supported by a new, locally rooted linguistic confidence”.

Another important prerequisite of the acceptance and institutionalisation of new linguistic forms is codification, a process involving the production and availability of dictionaries, grammar books and usage guides (Schneider 2003:252). Schneider further adds that institutionalisation is also consummated by the ascription of an X-English identification tag on the new variety, X standing for the specific type of English, e.g. Zimbabwean English, Namibian English et cetera, an eventual acknowledgement of the independence and ‘entitiness’ of the new English.

It is on this last criterion that Zimbabwean English fails to pass as a legitimate variety of English. A review of Zimbabwean English through the institutionalisation lens just described yields the unsurprising conclusion that institutionalisation of the Zimbabwean variety of English has not yet taken place, there being no codification of the variety and subsequently with many Zimbabweans not acknowledging the variety. Identification of the Zimbabwean variety of English as “Zimbabwean English” is also rarely heard despite some scholars discussed in the introduction insisting on its existence.

The absence of institutionalisation in part stems from the fact that norms of language in the country are still subordinated to external standard varieties such as British and American varieties of English. This is evident even from the local examination board, the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) which does not recognise nativised constructions or the so-called localised English, insisting on the use of conventional English idiom in Ordinary Level English composition, for example. Localised forms of English tend to be permissible only in creative writing, with such authors as Charles Mungoshi, Chenjerai Hove, Petina Gappah and Shimmer Chinodya significantly adopting the variety as part of their writing styles.

In addition the general public seems to scoff at Zimbabwean forms of English constructions and discouraging them as correct forms of English. Writing as far back as 1987, McGinley (1987:159) notes that the pride with which English is spoken in Zimbabwe is indeed matched by the pride with which school uniform is worn and indeed the pride with which a broader Western value system is approved in the country. Evidence on the ground shows that this attitude has not changed to date (see Hungwe 2007, Kadodo et al 2012, Chivhanga and Chimhenga 2013, Nkwe and Marungudzi 2015, among others). McGinley (1987:160) also makes one revealing observation in as far as the attitudes of Zimbabweans towards standard English is concerned,

“according to at least one observer, people want to imitate ‘success’: to speak English like Mugabe [President Robert Mugabe] does”. In an earlier seminar presentation by Mkanganwi (1976) it had been observed that asked to name the language they hated most, only 3% of the respondents reported that they hated English. English was also reported to be the second most loved language after the respondents’ mother tongues. It becomes clear that the attitude towards Zimbabwean English is evidently plaid, confirming Bruthiaux’s (2003:160) observation that “postcolonial Englishes tend to generate ambivalence among commentators”.

Furthermore, the extent of divergence from Standard forms of English by Zimbabwean English discussed in the above section (that divergence was mainly witnessed in the oral modes of the corpus, with written texts mainly conforming to the conventions of Standard English and not to an overwhelming extent at that) is further testimony to the fact that though there are doubtless typical forms of Zimbabwean English that occur in the corpus, these are not as widespread as there are in similar varieties of English. In the final analysis, it is clear that on the score of institutionalisation, Zimbabwean English may still be viewed as a learner language en route to maturation as a standard variety of English.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Zimbabwean English *vis-a-vis* the salient processes attendant upon the development of new varieties of English as conceptualised by Mollin (2007) and to some extent by Schneider (2003) i.e. functional expansion, nativisation and institutionalisation. Though Mollin believes that this is a rigorous criterion against which new Englishes may be tested, it has emerged from the foregoing assessment that the case of Zimbabwean English cannot squarely fit the new variety paradigm or the learner variety paradigm since it certainly satisfies the first two criteria but stumbles at the last. It then becomes difficult to decisively place the variety of English in Zimbabwe. Mollin’s criterion does not make it clear how much institutionalisation or even nativisation should have taken place to warrant variety status. Thus Zimbabwean English remains in limbo on the question of independent variety status. It would then be necessary to move beyond Mollin’s criteria and refine it to a more scientific and categorical tool that can assess new Englishes in order to place them more accurately on their developmental course.

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