

Identifying Scam E-Mails through Nigerian English Features

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the features of Nigerian English (henceforth NE) in one form of fraudulent e-mails; the all-pervading Nigerian scam letter commonly known as 4-1-9 informally called “Yahoo-Yahoo”. The existence of a variety of English called Nigerian English has been a subject of academic debate among scholars, researchers and students of the language alike. This gave birth to the “variation” and “deviation” positions on the matter. This paper aligns with the former, capitalising on the Variationist theory. The findings revealed that there is a chunk of Nigerian English features in so many scam e-mails which resulted in the conclusion that understanding the nature of this variety of English could help in avoiding being a victim of the scam.

Keywords: Nigerian English, Computer-Mediated Communication, scame-mail, Nigerian letter fraud

1.1 Introduction

Constant technological advancements have transformed our modes of communication through the provision of broader discursive platforms. Consequently, we employ diverse forms of computer-mediated communication (henceforth, CMC) to accomplish numerous ends within all life situations. That being the case, users of the internet and other computer-mediated forms of communication receive unsolicited messages from unknown persons and/or “organisations”, and as increasing numbers of businesses and consumers rely on the internet and other forms of electronic communication to conduct transactions; illegal activities, in the form advance-fee fraud and the likes, using the very same media are likewise on the increase.

Fraudulent schemes conducted via the Internet cost individuals and businesses billions, each year across the globe, which is apart from the psychological trauma the victims pass through. By every tic of the clock, people fall victims to scam rings’ traps, perhaps, as a result of their ignorance of the nature of Nigerian English. This work examines the ingredients of Nigerian English in the style and rhetoric of internet fraudsters who pose as foreigners that offer ‘lucrative’ business opportunities for their unsuspecting victims. This is why there is an urgent need to study the rhetorical and stylistic idiosyncrasies of Nigerian English used by these fraudsters in order to be able to detect their intention before they strike.

Fraudsters are relatively smart but with a well-composed cynicism, they can be easily identified. One clear fact is that every trick is made to materialize by a lust for easy money; it is the one thing the con artist and the victim have in common. Advance-fee fraud is an “art” and act that is more than ever a sturdy “business” which typically relies on e-mail and is often called “419” coined after the anti-fraud section of the criminal code in Nigeria, because it thrives there.

So many scam emails are attributed to Nigeria, but some originate from other West African nations like Niger, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Benin Republic, Ivory Coast and the rest. It has gotten so serious that emails from other nations in Europe and the Americas are as well regarded Nigerian not considering the evident source of the contact material.

Apprehension about linguistic features of fraudulent e-mail communications surfaced rather early in studies of internet fraud. Computational linguists and information systems experts have set up schemes to execute software forensics meaning to mark the writers of scam e-mails.

1.2 Nigerian English: Real or Deal?

The existence of a variety of English called Nigerian English has for long been a subject of academic debate among scholars, researchers and students of the language alike. This gave birth to the Accepters (Variation) and Rejecters (Deviation) theories.

Scores of scholars within and outside Nigeria, for instance, Walsh (1967), Bokamba (1982, 1991,) Jibril (1982), Akere (1982), Bamgbose (1971, 1982a, 1982b), Odumuh (1987, 1993), Adekunle (1974, 1985), Adetugbo (1979), Balogun (1980), Kujore (1985), Adegbija (1989), Kachru (1986, 1992a, 1992b), Jowitt (1991, 2007, 2010, 2011), Atoye (1991), Bamiro (1991, 1994), Goke-Pariola (1993), Sidi (2002), Fakoya (2006), Ajani (1994, 2001, 2005), Dadzie and Awonusi (2009) to mention a few, have confirmed the existence of a variety of English called Nigerian English.

However, the bone of contention to date is the existence of other varieties within the folds of Nigerian English. And this has compelled some scholars to engage in researches on the subject.

Brosnahan (1958) and N. G. Walsh (1967) are considered to be among the first to draw attention to the existence of a variety of English language known as “Nigerian English” (NE). Ogu (1992) quotes Walsh as saying:

“... the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English” (1992: 88).

Bokamba (1982, 1991) acknowledges the existence of a Nigerian English and referred to it as a collection of what he dubs “West African Vernacular English” (WAVE). On the same balance, Jibril (1982) sees Nigerian English as part of the range of “West African English.” Akere (1982) equally speaks of the surfacing of a “Standard Nigerian English.” Odumuh (1987, 1993) accepts NE as one of the new ‘Englishes’, stating that there is a sole super ordinate variety of English in Nigeria which can be considered as ‘Nigerian English’.

Jowitt (1991:191) is of the opinion that:

“... the English which is used in the Nigerian environment is something other than a replica of native speakers’ varieties... English in Nigeria... should not be seen as evidence of imperfect learning of the language but rather as possible signs of healthy acculturation, and of the creative capacity normally associated with learning and use of mother tongue”. Sidi (2002:09) is of the opinion that “Nigerian English is often thought of as a New English variety but very clearly there are varieties within which strictly speaking should be designated as sub-varieties”.

Relatively a handful of other linguists/scholars (cf. Adekunle 1974, 1985; Adetugbo 1979; Balogun 1980; Kujore 1985; Adegbija 1989; Kachru 1986, 1992a, 1992b, Jowitt 1991, 2011; Atoye 1991; Bamiro 1991, 1994; Goke-Pariola 1993; Sidi, 2002 etc) either wrote about, or made passing references to this variety of English Language. Bamgbose (1971, 1982a, 1982b), not only recognises the existence of an NE, but also has written relatively comprehensively on this variety of English Language.

On the contrary, the declaration that NE exists induces fervent opposition from some scholars of English in Nigeria and this has made the issue an exceedingly contentious one -Jowitt (2011). This ‘opposition group’ of scholars has been tagged ‘rejecters’ by Jowitt (*ibid*). These ‘rejecters’ include Salami (1968), Vincent (1974), Sailaja (2009). Salami (*ibid*), for example, argues that what has been identified as NE is inauthenticity “errors of usage.” Vincent (*ibid*), Sailaja (*ibid*) see it as “bad English” arguing that not all its users are comfortable with it.

Correspondingly, Vincent, Salami and Sailaja are, to a large extent, voicing the concern of a host of scholars of English Language in Nigerian institutions of learning who find it rather mocking and discourteous to refer to such as a variety of English Language. They would rather see any departure from the British variety as either deviant or incorrect.

The following view from Adekunle (1985) is quite illuminating and fitting at this point:

The English language has, as a result of many years of active use in the Nigerian speech community, become part of Nigeria’s contemporary environment and behaviour. It is an artefact whose foreign derived components have in the process of its evolution combined with native Nigerian elements to make it local.

1.3 Uniqueness of Dialectal English in Nigeria

Providing the human itch to have a distinctive socio-cultural identity flourishes, language will continue to be as varied as those who speak it. It is these socio-cultural behaviours that sometimes turn to a source of worry for linguists as they seek authenticity for such language. Many distinguishing features of Nigerian dialectal forms of the English language exist at the syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and linguistic levels.

Interestingly, these ethnic traits do not simply fade away just because a speaker is educated. This is because disparity in the use of English language, particularly in Nigeria, reveals more of cultural difference than educational one. The language, as it is now, has been domesticated to reflect the broad social circumstance within which it operates. Take these as examples as presented by Adebija (1998) in Idiagbon (2006):

1. Could be generally intelligible but ungrammatical. For instance, “can you please off the light?”
2. Could be meaningful in Nigerian context only. For instance “small by small the small man becomes a big man”.
3. Could be grammatical but adjudged hypercorrect thus rendering the statement socially unacceptable. For instance, in requesting, some might say: “Would you please help me lift this load?”
4. Could be internationally unacceptable but locally intelligible. E.g How work?,How now?
5. Finally, it could be deviant according to native speaker norms but often unacceptable locally. For instance; “Sorry” (as an expression of sympathy for an incident not caused by the speaker)

Idiagbon (*ibid*) is of the view that certain features in indigenous languages are transferred directly into the Nigerian English in the pretext of strengthening or “consolidating social interaction”. For instance, the forms of greeting like “Well done” and “Well seated” (Idiagbon, 2006) are frequently used. The notion of the former has been extended and made applicable to cover certain circumstances not intended in the Standard English, while the latter is a Nigerian coined lexis taken to be an English equal of the one in local languages.

Whilst the use of “well done” in Nigerian situation is a type of salutation used as an informal greeting by a passer-by to the workers on a post or who have pleasingly completed a job, “well seated” is used to acknowledge the presence of those who are in sitting pose as at the time the speaker is passing by. More often than not, “well seated” is used by the speaker as reverence to those they meet sitting before they go on to request favour.

According to Akere (1981), Nigerians are fond of these greetings “because the English language does not possess linguistic markers for such non-occurring features, the Nigerian user of English substitutes the nearest equivalents in English for them”.

1.4 Procedure

50 e-mails received (in the bulk mail box of the researcher) between 12-5- 2014 to 24-02-17 were selected for analysis. Only those which followed the basic outlines of the Nigerian letter fraud were selected and the sample size was restricted in order to make thorough analysis of the e-mails. Each email was read through and subjected to Content Analysis, that is, the language used, including narrative/diction style and structure, vocabulary, rhetorical techniques, and errors in the written English were examined. During analysis, each of these variable items was treated as a heading and the findings were revealed.

2 Findings/Analysis

2.1 Headings

Headings in scam mails vary significantly, depending on the target of the sender. In all the cases studied, certain persuasive key words occurred fairly frequently: “**urgent**”; “**you are at risk**”; “**balance payment**”; “**profitable business**”; “**please assist**”; “**assistance**”; “**help**”; “**reply**”; “**respond**”; “**proposal**”; “**proposition**”; “**a good deal**”; “**publish or perish**” among others.

These are persuasive approaches that can easily be smelled as being the language use of the user of English as Second Language.

2.2 Salutations

Salutations in scam mails are eccentric in their nature. They contain words of desperation. For instance, some show intimacy and or affection from or by a total stranger. Some of these are: “**dear friend**”; “**dear madam**”; “**my dear**”; “**dearest**”; “**hello my dear**”; “**my lovely**”; “**ATTN**”; “**Attention**”; “**your attention**”; “**Good day**”; “**dear customer**”; “**esteemed customer**”; “**valued customer**”. These are not salutations used by native speakers of English, as implied by the senders, in formal documents particularly from organisations that claim to have been “connected” with the recipient or corporate organisations such as banks that have the personal details of all their customers.

2.3 Closings

Closings of the e-mails studied also showed some eccentric, frantic need for response from the recipient. Some of these closings include:

"Cannot wait to hear from you"; "Till I read from you soon"; "Please reply me via my email"; "Your immediate respond [sic] will be highly appreciated"; "Best regards", "regards", "Your's [sic]"; "Sincerely"; "Truly"; "Faithfully"; "Yours in Christ"; "I waiting [sic] to read from you"; "Thank you in advance for your anticipated co-operation"; "God bless you"; "God be with you".

2.4.0 Rhetorical Strategies

Writers of the e-mails studied used appalling tones throughout their narration. Senders tried to entice, convince, persuade or cajole the recipient to either assist them because they were in a pitiful situation or to partake in a proposed "business" or "transaction". Consequently, they opened their letters with:

- 2.4.1 assuaging or regretful comments:** "Compliments of the season, and I pray that this mail meet you in good Health"; "Pardon the abruptness of this letter; it is due to its exigency"; "it is not in my habit to do this but I want to help my fellow African"; "I do not mean to interrupt your busy day, but this is very important for both of us"
- 2.4.2 Acknowledgement of the unexpected nature of the e-mail:** "I know this proposal letter may come to you as a surprise considering the fact that we have not had any formal acquaintance before"; "This proposal may have come to you as a surprise, I would feel the same too"
- 2.4.3 presenting information on how the receiver came to their attention:** "You have been recommended by an associate who assured me in confidence of your ability and reliability in prosecuting a business transaction of high net value requiring maximum confidentiality"; "You were introduced to us by one of our clients who also benefitted from our generosity but would not want us to disclose his identity"
- 2.4.4 religious appeals:** "Thanks and God bless"; "In God's name I say peace to you and your family"; "I am Pastor Enoch, a man of God"; "brother John will contact you soon" were noticed in the e-mails studied.
- 2.4.5 Emphasis on the confidentiality of their business:** "First, I must Solicit for[sic] your strictest confidence in this transaction; this is by virtue of its nature as being utterly confidential and top secret"
- 2.4.6 stressing the exigency or immediacy of their message:** "As I expect your urgent respond [sic] "; "Get Back To Me Urgently!"; "Contact our Customer Care immediately"; "hurry up because many people are waiting for you to miss this golden opportunity".
- 2.4.7 legitimizing their scams by referring to them as business proposals, propositions, relationships, and transactions:** "My primary reason for writing to you is to seek for[sic] your partnership in a business transaction"; "I want you to participate in this profitable venture"
- 2.4.8 assuring that their dealings would be secure:** "This transaction is 100% risk free."; "This project is not risky"; "you are in safe hands as we have reputation for results"; "this transaction is already insured by a famous insurance firm in the UK"
- 2.4.9 promoting the advantage, proceeds, or value to be mounted up by the e-mail recipient:** "your help is been [sic] sought in order to successfully complete a profitable venture that is of immense benefit to you ... "; "...You will be opportuned [sic] to have huge turn over in this venture.."; "this transaction will earn you huge profit and give you an edge over other competitors.."

2.5.0 Grammar

The most glaring way of identifying scam mails is through their bad grammar. Scammers are most often interested in persuading their targets by way of impressing them with the English language and do not pay so much attention to the rules of the language. Some of the grammatical problems observed in the studied e-mails are:

2.5.1 Punctuation errors:

The commonest punctuation errors observed in the e-mails studied were the misuses of the comma, the question mark and the period or full stop. These problems appeared in many of the e-mails. Some of the punctuation errors noticed are: "you have to confirm that(,) you are an account holder..."; " I hope this e-mail meets you in good health(?)"; "I ... thought we might get to have a business deal(.)and am sending you this e-mail..."

2.5.2 ellipsis

Scam e-mails studied contained some omissions of grammatically required words or phrases with the thought that recipients could infer them. Some of the instances observed are: “**[I]** am happy to contact you ...”; “Our boss will be on **summer** [vacation]; “... will deliver some containers of **CD and DVD** [players]”.

2.5.3 Poor capitalization

Poor capitalisation was observed in many of the studied e-mails. This ranged from starting a new sentence in lower cases to the writing of first letters of proper names and the first person singular pronoun (I) in lower cases: “**i** want to assure you that our agent from **canada** will contact you soon ...”, ... our cargo will arrive **nigeria** through **tin can port** in **lagos**...”

2.5.4 Poor agreement patterns

Inconsistent subject-verb agreements were observed in the examined e-mails: “My family **are** [is] from Africa ...”; “Our team of lawyers **are** [is] ready to sign the agreement on our behalf ...”; “...confirm that your records **is**[are] in order...”; “details of your account **is** [are]needed “

2.5.5 Wrong pluralisation

It was observed in the examined e-mails that count and non-count nouns are not differentiated in scam mails. Some of the instances observed include: “I have **a good news** for you ... “; I lost all my **offsprings**during the terrorist attack ...”; “We lost over 5000 **cattles** in my family ...”; “our lawyer will call you for **anadvice** on how to invest in this venture.”

2.5.6 word-form problems

So many issues of word forms were noticed in the e-mails observed: “I wait your urgent **respond** [response] immediately.”; “You may **loose**[lose] this great opportunity”; “...because we will not be responsible for your **lost** [loss]..”; “...we help women in Africa start ... beauty **saloon**[salon] businesses ...”; “You are **adviced** [advised]to confirm you account details...”

2.5.7 wrong spellings

Even with the spell check on computers, some serious spelling issues were observed in the e-mails studied. Perhaps, this could be due the hasty condition under which these e-mails are usually composed. Some of the misspellings noticed are: “**acomodation**” [accommodation] ; “**trensfer**” [transfer]; “**comunicate**” [communicate]; “**comfirm**” [confirm]; “**imformation**” [information]; “**suspention**” [suspension]; “**deposite**” [deposit]; “**adviced**” [advised], “**regreat**” [regret], “**folow**” [follow]; “**coligue**” [colleague]; “**valuded**” [valued] “**costomer**”[customer]; “**lick**” [leak]; “**consinement**” [consignment] etcetera.

2.5.8 Tense problems

Poor knowledge of the English tense was demonstrated by the writers of many of the studied emails. For instance, not only did they use wrong tense rules as in wrong regular and irregular verb patterns, but also used wrong tense rules in making their cases. Some are: “Your documents are **been** [being] processed...”; “Your account **has been** [was]accessed...last weekend...”; “we **have** [been]**waited** [waiting] for your response since ...”, “your account **was** [has] been selected to win \$500,000”.

2.5.9 Misuse of preposition

In the observed e-mails, propositions were either used where they were not required or substituted with the wrong ones or even omitted in some cases: “We seek **for** your assistance in establishing a sales office in your locality.”; “you can demand **for** an agent clearance form from our head agent”, “I write to congratulate you **for** your selection to participate in this programme”, “Our CEO has emphasised **on** your BVN and token number before approval”; “You can discuss **about** it with our agent ...”; “the money is lying idle **at** a bank **of** Switzerland”; “... to enable us [to] process your payment”.

3 Diction/ Narrative style

Lexical choices and narrative styles in the observed e-mails suggested that their authors were actually speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL); Nigerians specifically. This is because the content had lexical items that are mostly used by Nigerians. One of such instances is the unnecessary use of titles.

So many of the senders introduced themselves (or their “business associates”) with gibberish titles such as “**Doctor**”, “**Engineer**”, “**Barrister**”, “**Pastor**”, “**Arc.**”, “**Pharmacist**”, “**Mister**”, etc. Also, their openings, even when the documents were supposed to be strictly formal, were informal or personal. Expressions such as “**I pray that this mail meet you in good Health**”; “**I hope you are in good spirits to read this mail**”, among others, were used. In other words, there was no distinction between formal and informal narrative style so much that contractions were observed in so many “official” documents. Yet again, the presence of Anglicism and neologisms was noticed in the e-mails. Expressions like “I tried getting through to you **severally** ...”; “I was **opportuned** to have contact with the manufacturer of the commodity...”; “You can pay us instalmentally after which we will make the delivery”; “contact our agent ... before **next tomorrow** ...”; “me and my sister were **disvirgined** by our stepfather...” etc were observed.

4 Conclusion

The description of the linguistic features of scam e-mails presented in this piece makes it safe to conclude that most of these letters appear to have been authored by defectively proficient English speakers who obviously try to use language that will strike, lure, comfort, and induce compassion in their target victims emanating from the inspiring titles and carefully, yet cunningly selected diction; the recurrent rhetorical strategies and appeal to security, authenticity, confidentiality, and urgency; and the concocted accounts of injustice, crises, and golden opportunities and the assurances of enormous wealth obtainable in these e-mails. Lack of the awareness of the English limitations of the authors of these kinds of e-mails has made so many people victims. Surprisingly, so many incompetently composed e-mails are being sent to so many educated English speakers, even the native speakers. We might assume that any such mature person with sufficient education as to be able to use a computer should also be able to see how badly written and unquestionably deceitful these e-mails are. Preventing scam e-mails from getting into personal computers should, possibly, be regarded as a lesser concern; the principal aim should, in effect, be the edification of “Netizens” to be on familiar terms with deceptive content, empty swaying techniques, and distinctive language features of fraudulent e-mails when they see them, thereby preventing them from becoming casualties.

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