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Emerging Loanwords in Nigerian English

Ordu Isaac Chioma^{1,*}, Florence Nne Agwu¹

¹Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: chioma.isaac@ust.edu.ng

Abstract

Loanwords are an integral part of language development, particularly in multilingual societies where speakers are in constant contact with other languages. As languages evolve, lexical items are borrowed to meet new communicative, cultural, and social needs. This study identifies emerging loanwords in Nigerian English and examines how they enter Nigerian English, with particular attention to indigenous Nigerian languages within the Port Harcourt speech community. The study is anchored in Terence Odlin's theory of language transfer, especially the concept of substratum transfer, which explains the influence of a source or native language on a recipient language. A qualitative survey design was adopted, with data collected through random sampling from language use on WhatsApp and Facebook. The findings show that many emerging loanwords in Nigerian English originate from Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Nigerian Pidgin. Some retain their meanings in both donor and recipient languages, whereas others undergo semantic change after entering Nigerian English. Of the 108 items examined, 30 exhibit semantic change and 78 retain their donor-language meanings. The study recommends greater scholarly attention to emerging loanwords because they contribute to the continuing lexical expansion and localization of Nigerian English.

Keywords: emerging loanwords; Nigerian English; language contact; lexical borrowing; semantic change

1. Introduction

Every language operates within linguistic conventions, but speakers often encounter communicative situations in which the available vocabulary does not fully express local experiences,

concepts, identities, or cultural meanings. In multilingual settings, this need frequently leads to lexical borrowing from one language (the donor language) into another (the recipient language). Borrowing is especially common in domains such as culture, science, technology, social life, and the environment, where new realities may require new lexical expressions.

In Nigerian English, emerging loanwords are important to the continuing expansion of the variety. Nigerian English exists within a highly multilingual environment in which English is in sustained contact with hundreds of indigenous languages. Such contact creates conditions in which lexical items move into English usage to satisfy communicative needs and represent culturally specific experiences. Akindele and Adegbite describe the localization of English in Nigeria as a process through which the language acquires local characteristics that distinguish it from native varieties of English [1, 8]. Loanwords and emerging loanwords may therefore be regarded as important markers of Nigerian English.

This study focuses on emerging loanwords: lexical items borrowed into Nigerian English that are already in active use but are not yet fully stabilized or conventionalized in its lexicon. It examines their sources, meanings in donor and recipient languages, and the extent to which their meanings change after borrowing.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Odlin's Language Transfer Theory

This study is guided by Odlin's account of language transfer [16]. Odlin distinguishes between borrowing transfer and substratum transfer. Borrowing transfer refers broadly to influence from a subsequently learned language on a previously acquired language, whereas substratum transfer concerns influence from a speaker's native or previously acquired language on the acquisition or use of another language. The framework is useful for explaining how forms, meanings, and patterns may move across languages in contact situations.

In the Nigerian context, substratum transfer is particularly relevant because speakers of Nigerian English routinely draw on indigenous languages and Nigerian Pidgin. Through spoken and written interaction, lexical material from these languages may enter Nigerian English. This study therefore applies the substratum-transfer perspective to the movement of lexical items from Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Nigerian Pidgin into Nigerian English.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Arrival and Development of English in Nigeria

The history of English in Nigeria is closely connected with trade, missionary activity, colonial administration, and formal education. Eka traces the development and institutionalization of English within Nigeria's multilingual environment [9]. Awonusi discusses major stages in the historical development of English in Nigeria and the ways in which local language contact influenced its phonological and structural features [4]. Earlier contact between West Africans and European traders also encouraged the development of contact varieties that later contributed to the linguistic environment in which English expanded [19].

Nigeria is commonly situated within the "Outer Circle" of World Englishes, where English has an important institutional role as a second language alongside indigenous languages. In such settings, the language is adapted to local communicative needs and sociocultural realities [3].

The Nigerian variety has consequently developed distinctive lexical, semantic, phonological, and pragmatic characteristics.

3.2. Nigerian English as a Distinct Variety

Nigerian English is widely described as a localized variety shaped by prolonged contact between English and Nigerian languages. Bamgbose emphasizes the adaptation of English to local concepts and communicative patterns [6]. The process has also been described as the domestication or Nigerianization of English, reflecting the way Nigerians have adapted the language to local cultural and linguistic realities [1, 21]. Nigerian English is therefore not simply an imperfect reproduction of British or American English; it is a recognizable variety of World Englishes with its own conventional patterns of usage [15, 18].

3.3. Emerging Loanwords

For the purposes of this study, emerging loanwords are lexical items transferred from a donor language into a recipient language that are currently used by speakers but have not yet become fully stabilized or conventionalized in the recipient language. These items may arise because speakers need culturally appropriate ways to express meanings for which no immediately suitable English equivalent is preferred in a given interaction. With repeated use, some of these forms may become established loanwords.

The emergence of such items is particularly likely in multilingual societies where speakers move frequently between languages. Nigerian English provides fertile ground for this process because speakers routinely interact through English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages in face-to-face and digital communication.

4. Empirical Review

Yusuff examined English loans in Yoruba and showed that borrowed items are adapted to the linguistic structures and phonological processes of Yoruba [5]. Although that study focused on English items entering Yoruba, it demonstrates how borrowing is shaped by the structural properties of the recipient language.

Ijioma and Ezeafulukwe investigated loanwords in Igbo and reported processes such as semantic modification, orthographic adaptation, and pronunciation change [12]. Their work highlights the linguistic adjustments that may accompany borrowing but differs from the present study, which focuses on indigenous-language items entering Nigerian English.

Usar and Ofoegbu studied English and Hausa loanwords in Tiv and found that borrowed forms undergo phonological adjustment to conform to Tiv patterns [22]. Their findings further demonstrate that language contact can reshape borrowed items to fit recipient-language conventions.

Moyi, Muddasir, and Egu examined lexical borrowing in Nigerian English and showed that local-language items contribute to the lexical distinctiveness of Nigerian English [13]. The present study extends this line of inquiry by focusing specifically on emerging loanwords, their origins, their meanings in donor and recipient languages, and whether semantic change occurs.

5. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative survey design. Data were obtained through random sampling of naturally occurring language use on the social-media platforms WhatsApp and Facebook within the Port Harcourt speech community. Candidate lexical items were identified as emerging loanwords when they appeared in Nigerian English discourse but originated from Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, or Nigerian Pidgin. Each item was then classified according to its donor language, its meaning in Nigerian English, its meaning in the donor language, an example of Nigerian English usage, and whether semantic change had occurred.

Semantic change (SC) indicates that the meaning of an item in Nigerian English differs from its meaning in the donor language. No semantic change (NSC) indicates that the item retains substantially the same meaning after borrowing.

6. Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1 presents the 108 emerging loanwords identified in the study.

Table 1: Emerging loanwords in Nigerian English

S/N	Emerging loanword	Origin	Meaning in recipient language (NE)	Meaning in donor language	Example in Nigerian English	Remark
1	Japa	Yoruba	Travel abroad or leave a particular country for another.	To travel or leave a particular place to another	Everybody in Nigeria wants to Japa	NSC
2	Odogwu	Igbo	Champion or Hero	Champion or Hero	He is the Odogwu in the house	NSC
3	Omugwo	Igbo	To care for a woman who has recently given birth	To care for a woman who has recently given birth	My mother went for Omugwo	NSC
4	Kayamata	Hausa	A kind of charm used by women to attract or hypnotize men	Product for women.	Some girls use Kayamata	SC
5	Oluotu	Yoruba	The head of a crew or team	The head of a crew or team	Call the Oluotu.	NSC
6	Wotowoto	Yoruba	Rapidly or continuously	Rapidly or continuously	Chelsea gave it to Man U Wotowoto	NSC
7	Nkwobi	Igbo	Usually meat prepared and served with a small wooden mortar	Usually meat prepared and served with a small wooden mortar	Meet me at the Nkwobi joint	NSC
8	Onyememe	Igbo	A generous person	One who makes things happen	My husband is Onyememe	SC
9	Biko	Igbo	Please or pleading	Please or pleading	Send me money Biko	NSC
10	Bikonu	Igbo	Passionate appeal	Passionate appeal	Bikonu send me money	NSC
11	Yan	NP	Talk about	Talk about	He did not Yan well at all	NSC
12	Aje	NP	Someone born into wealth and pampered	Someone born into wealth and pampered	Allow her, she is Aje	SC
13	Lap	NP	To visit someone or go and meet someone.	To carry someone on your lap	I will lap you this evening	SC
14	Emilokan	Yoruba	It is my turn	It is my turn	Emilokan give it to me	NSC
15	Ishiaalah	Hausa	By the grace of God	By the grace of God	I will do it Ishiaalah	NSC
16	Awuruawu	Igbo	Useless	Useless	Remove this Awuruawu car from the road	NSC
17	Yowaa	Hausa	Very good one or very correct	Proceed	Yowaa carry on	SC
18	Abacha	Igbo	A kind of food (special salad) made with sliced cassava	A kind of food (special salad) made with sliced cassava	We ate Abacha	NSC
19	Areafada	NP	Someone in control of a particular area. Usually to show disapproval especially of an adult who acts like youths.	Someone in control of a particular area. Usually to show disapproval especially of an adult who acts like youths.	See this Areafada	NSC
20.	Point-one	NP	The headman of a cult gang	The headman of a cult gang.	This is the Point- one	NSC
21	Whine	NP	To brainwash or convince somebody of something.	To brainwash or convince somebody of something.	Go ahead and whine	NSC
22	Iti	Igbo	Someone regarded as ignorant or foolish	Someone regarded as ignorant or foolish	See this Iti	NSC
23	Ngwanu	Igbo	Okay	Okay	Ngwanu let us go	NSC
24	Omole	Yoruba	Faithful one	Faithful one	Victor is the Omole	NSC
25	Kerewa	Yoruba	Making love or having sex	Making love or having sex	Kerewa must follow	NSC
26	Onyeoma	Igbo	Good person	Good person	You are behaving like Onyeoma now	NSC
27	Joor	Yoruba	Please	Please	Leave me joor	NSC
28	Shogbo	Yoruba	Do you understand?	Do you understand?	Shagbo go and bring it	NSC
29	Omo	Yoruba	Exclamation of surprise.	Baby	Omo that guy is crazy	SC

S/N	Emerging loanword	Origin	Meaning in recipient language (NE)	Meaning in donor language	Example in Nigerian English	Remark
30	Oriri	Igbo	Merriment or enjoyment	Merriment or enjoyment	He likes Oriri	NSC
31	Pim	Igbo	The slightest noise or word	The slightest noise or word	Let me hear pim from you	NSC
32	Tatah	Igbo	Childish	A child or little baby	He acts like Tatah	SC
33	Odumeje	Igbo	A charm or power used to anticipate future events	Going with me.	The pastor uses Odumeje	SC
34	Kai	Hausa	Exclamation (what)	Exclamation (what)	Kai what are you saying	NSC
35	Shege	NP	Deal with or mercilessly	Deal with or mercilessly	The man showed me Shege	NSC
36	Haba	Hausa	Expression of surprise	Expression of surprise	Haba, that is not what I said	NSC
37	Olle	Yoruba	Thief	Thief	See this Olle	NSC
38	Igwe	Igbo	To show very high approval	Represents a king	Igwe I hail you	SC
39	Nkor	Yoruba	You too	You too	You nkor	NSC
40	Mba	Igbo	Simple disagreement	Simple disagreement	Mba, change it	NSC
41	Mbanu	Igbo	A very strong disagreement	A very strong disagreement	That is not correct Mbanu	NSC
42	Sha	Yoruba	Anyway	Anyway	Leave her Sha	NSC
43	Shege	Hausa	An abuse or a curse word	Illegitimate	She told me shege	SC
44	Kwa	Igbo	Too; to show disapproval of a personality.	Too; to show disapproval of a personality.	See you Kwa	NSC
45	Kpekus	NP	Vagina	Vagina	See the Kpekus	NSC
46	Nmama	Igbo	Very good	Thank you	The night was Nmama	SC
47	Ukwu	Igbo	Buttocks	Waist	See the Ukwu	SC
48	Kilode	Yoruba	Why	Why	You did not come again Kilode	NSC
49	Ada	Igbo	The first female child (daughter)	The first female child (daughter)	She is the Ada of the house	NSC
50	Keije	Igbo	How far or what has happened	How are things?	Bright, Keiji, was there class today	SC
51	Mashai	Hausa	Barbecue attendant	Skewer	Call the Manshi for me	SC
52	Buga	Yoruba	A kind of dance	Pompous	He dances Buga	SC
53	Jagajaga	NP	Uncoordinated, zigzag or anyhow	Uncoordinated, zigzag or anyhow.	Her writing is Jagajaga	NSC
54	Uchem	Igbo	Interest or mind	Sense	Uchem is not in that arrangement	SC
55	Asiwaju	Yoruba	Leader	First person	He is the Asiwaju of our party	SC
56	Jagaban	Hausa	Master	Master	Wike is the Jagaban of Rivers politics	SC
57	Taah	Igbo	Simple exclamation of rejection	Simple exclamation of rejection	Taah don't say that	NSC
58	Tufiakwa	Igbo	Strong exclamation of rejection	Strong exclamation of rejection.	Tufiakwa it will not happen	NSC
59	Ntoor	Igbo	Exclamation of disapproval usually expressed together with the eyes	Exclamation of disapproval usually expressed together with the eyes	She is telling me Ntoor	NSC
60	Gidigba	Igbo	Very strong	Very strong	I stand Gidigba	NSC
61	Okpa	Igbo	A kind of food made from corn.	A kind of food made with corn	She wants to eat Okpa	NSC
62	Eweeh	Igbo	Exclamation of surprise	Exclamation of surprise.	Ewehh I didn't know	NSC
63	Shishi	Igbo	The smallest amount of money	The smallest amount of money	I don't have Shishi	NSC
64	Oluwa	Yoruba	God	God	Oluwa is involved	NSC
65	Yeye	Yoruba	Useless, stupid or foolish	Useless, stupid or foolish	See this Yeye man	NSC
66	Oha	Igbo	A kind of leaf used in cooking (soup)	A kind of leaf used in cooking soup	I want Oha soup	NSC
67	Akanchi	Igbo	Stingy or Stinginess	Stingy or Stinginess	See this Akanchi man	NSC
68	Jare	Yoruba	Forget it	Cut off		SC

S/N	Emerging loanword	Origin	Meaning in recipient language (NE)	Meaning in donor language	Example in Nigerian English	Remark
69	Jeje	Yoruba	Gently, slowly or gradually	Gently, slowly or gradually	Let's be going Jeje	NSC
70	Choke	NP	Happened in fullness of its strength	Happened in fullness of its strength	The party Choke	NSC
71	Manya	Igbo	Drink	Drink	Come and give me Manya	NSC
72	Ebube	Igbo	Visible Spiritual power	Glory	That pastor comes with Ebube	SC
73	Odeshi	Igbo	A kind of charm that the users believe does not allow bullet to penetrate their body.	Something especially liquid that is not leaking.	All of them have Odeshi	SC
74	Kolombi	NP	To take possession of something illegally or without proper authorization.	To take possession of something illegally or without proper authorization.	The guy Kolombi my girlfriend	NSC
75	Oku	Igbo	Sexy or sexually hot	Fire	She is baby Oku	SC
76	Shingbi	NP	No money at all	No money at all	No shingbi in my pocket	NSC
77	Obiageri	Igbo	One who has come to eat especially wealth	One who was born to eat especially wealth.	She is Obiageri	NSC
78	Onyenkem	Igbo	My own person as in a cherished friend	My own person as in a cherished friend	John is Onyenkem	NSC
79	Gbege	NP	Trouble	Trouble	Please don't cause any Gbege	NSC
80	Omalicha	Igbo	Extremely beautiful	Extremely beautiful	Amaka is Omalicha	NSC
81	Nyash	NP	Female buttocks	Female buttocks	She has a fine Nyash	NSC
82	Laye	Yoruba	That cannot work or happened	That cannot work or happen	All you have said is Laye	NSC
83	Ugba	Igbo	A kind of food (local salad) that is usually dark	A kind of food (local salad) that is usually dark	The Ugba is very sweet	NSC
84	Ukwa	Igbo	A special kind of food in Igboland.	A special kind of food in Igboland	You need to eat Ukwa	NSC
85	Onyeoma	Igbo	Good person	Good person	Let me behave like Onyeoma	NSC
86	Ewu	Igbo	Foolish person	Goat	See this Ewu	SC
87	Abi	Yoruba	Question tag for confirmation of an utterance or a statement	Question tag for confirmation of an utterance or a statement	You want to eat Abi	NSC
88	Otitor	Yoruba	Finished	Finished	Work Otitor	NSC
89	Gidigbam	NP	Stand firm, very strong or deeply rooted	Stand firm, very strong or deeply rooted	Boss, we are here Gidigbam	NSC
90	Oyi	Igbo	Cold	Cold	The Oyi is too much	NSC
91	Awoof	Yoruba	Bonus	Empty	You like Awoof so much	SC
92	Magana	Hausa	Discussion or speaking	Discussion or speaking	See them Magana	NSC
93	Iyawo	Yoruba	Used as a form of address for women	Wife	Let us go to Iyawo's place	SC
94	Kpele	Yoruba	Sorry	Sorry	Kpele you had an accident	NSC
95	Gbam	Igbo	The point (usually an exclamation)	Final	I targeted his head gbam	SC
96	Oshey	Yoruba	Thank you	Thank you	I enjoyed it Oshey	NSC
97	Ogbonga	NP	Very strong	Authentic	This is Ogbonga medicine	SC
98	Oka	Igbo	Locally made firearm	A town in Igboland	See them carrying Oka made	SC
99	Ekwueme	Igbo	Talk and do (one that keeps to his word)	Talk and do (one that keeps to his word)	The man is Ekwueme	NSC
100	Ayaya	NP	Nonsense, useless or worthless	Nonsense, useless or worthless	See this Ayaya	NSC
101	Faji	Yoruba	Enjoy or enjoyment	Enjoy or enjoyment	They went to Faji	NSC

S/N	Emerging loanword	Origin	Meaning in recipient language (NE)	Meaning in donor language	Example in Nigerian English	Remark
102	Ji	Igbo	Has or have especially money or riches	Has or have	My uncle Ji cash or money	NSC
103	Tuale	Yoruba	Salute or hailing of a surprise	A form of greeting	I Taule for you	SC
104	Pepper	NP	To annoy or deal with someone	To annoy or deal with someone	Let it Pepper them	NSC
105	Nmeme	Igbo	Occasion, ceremony	Occasion, ceremony	She likes Nmeme	NSC
106	Iwe	Igbo	Anger or annoyance	Anger or annoyance	Iwe is in this country now	NSC
107	Okpara	Igbo	First son	First son	He is the Okpara of the house	NSC
108	Otele	Igbo	Useless or Stupid person	Buttocks	See this Otele	SC

Key: SC = Semantic Change; NSC = No Semantic Change; NP = Nigerian Pidgin.

Table 2: Distribution of semantic change by donor language

Donor language	Semantic change (SC)	No semantic change (NSC)
Igbo	15	38
Hausa	5	4
Yoruba	7	21
Nigerian Pidgin	3	15
Total	30	78

Table 1 shows that the 108 emerging loanwords identified in the study originate from Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Nigerian Pidgin. Some items retain substantially the same meanings in the donor and recipient languages, whereas others acquire different meanings in Nigerian English.

As summarized in Table 2, 30 items exhibit semantic change and 78 show no semantic change. Igbo contributes 53 items in total, comprising 15 cases of semantic change and 38 cases of no semantic change. Hausa contributes 9 items, with 5 cases of semantic change and 4 cases of no semantic change. Yoruba contributes 28 items, of which 7 show semantic change and 21 do not. Nigerian Pidgin contributes 18 items, with 3 cases of semantic change and 15 cases of no semantic change. These results suggest that meaning retention is more common than semantic change among the emerging loanwords identified in this dataset.

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates the importance of emerging loanwords in the continuing development of Nigerian English. These lexical items arise from sustained contact between English, indigenous Nigerian languages, and Nigerian Pidgin, and they help speakers express culturally specific meanings and local experiences. The findings show that emerging loanwords may either retain their donor-language meanings or undergo semantic change after entering Nigerian English. In the dataset examined, the majority retain their original meanings.

Emerging loanwords should therefore be regarded as part of the broader processes of lexical borrowing, language contact, localization, and vocabulary expansion. Linguists and language teachers should pay closer attention to these developing forms, particularly to the conditions under which they become widespread, stabilized, or conventionalized in Nigerian English. Future studies could extend the dataset beyond social-media discourse and compare usage across regions, age groups, occupations, and communicative settings.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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