Spelling and simulated shibboleths in Nigerian computer-mediated communication

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An overview of recent developments in Nigerian electronic messaging

CMC and textual language

Since its coinage by Hiltz and Turoff (1978) the term computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been adapted and broadly conceptualised as *interactive communication* by and among *human beings* via *networked* computers and mobile devices. Several definitions of CMC have been offered in the literature but Herring's (2007) definition of CMC as 'predominantly text-based human–human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony' is adopted in this article because it stresses the textual aspect of the communicative interaction and accommodates all forms of textual language use mediated by the Internet, the World Wide Web and mobile technologies. This approach to CMC focuses on the production, transmission and exchange of naturally-occurring text-based human language and highlights the fact that human beings (as opposed to automated or artificial systems) are both the agents or initiators and recipients of the communication under investigation. Although communication is not unique to humans, the ability to use human language for meaningful social interactions is the exclusive preserve of the human species. Thus the perspective human beings bring to virtual interactions is accounted for in CMC. Internet interlocutors (also known as online interactants, *netizens* or *textizens* in the case of regular SMS texts composers/senders) employ textual data to convey and exchange their thoughts, opinions, observations, feelings as well as messages from other people or sources (Ifukor, 2011). These interactive possibilities make CMC a technology, medium, and engine of social relations (Jones, 1995:11) and language use is at the core.

Text-based CMC then refers to the production of human language mostly in typed form (comprising alphanumeric characters), *visually displayed* on a computer or mobile phone screen(s) and the

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dissemination of such via networked computers or wireless technologies. If the message is read in real-time and an instantaneous response is given, it is called synchronous CMC because both or all interlocutors are simultaneously online. If the message is read or responded to at a later time, it is called asynchronous CMC because the recipient(s) is/are offline when the message is sent. Therefore, the timing of message receipt and/or response is very crucial to the synchronicity versus asynchronicity of CMC. Real-time interaction fosters synchronicity just as delayed-time correspondence relates to asynchronicity. Synchronous CMC includes Internet Relay Chat (IRC), instant messaging (IM) and ICQ ('I Seek You') while examples of asynchronous CMC include email, listserv, weblog (blog), online discussion forums and SMS text messaging.

In terms of modality, textual CMC undeniably has the form of writing and simulates some features of speech. It is inherently a virtual, visible and visual *representation* of human language as well as the attendant discursive nuances of face-to-face interactions (cf. Mitton, 1996). All forms of writing systems are actually attempts to simulate human language or communication patterns by the innovative and 'conventional use of visible symbols for the recording or transmission of ideas, or of ideas and sounds … or of sounds unaccompanied by ideas' (Edgerton, 1941: 149) but the previously held assumption that spelling is 'the use of conventionalized writing systems that encode languages' (Perfetti et al, 1997: xi) is being challenged by different writing practices available in CMC data. Halliday (1978) considers large-scale deliberate deviation from the *norm* as 'anti-language', Sebba (2003) calls it 'spelling rebellion' while Shaw (2008) views it as identity representation through 'accent'.

Empirical evidence from Nigerian CMC data shows that non-standard spellings do more than highlighting CMC language as a virtual vernacular of some sort. In fact, informal Internet discourse provides the means for visualising regional accents of Nigerian English (NigE) and playfully simulating some phonological features of face-to-face communicative behaviours of Nigerians. As Sebba (2007: 6) rightly points out about writing in general, the visible representation of language in CMC is 'where issues of language as a formal object and of language as a social and cultural phenomenon intersect. It touches on matters of social identity, national identity, cultural politics, representation and voice. It foregrounds familiar linguistic issues of dialect and standard, of "norm" and "variation". It affects, and is affected by, technology and economics.' The conclusion that can be drawn from our observations of writing patterns in several CMC data sets is that the twin factors of digitally-aided freedom of expression and linguistic economy constrain the spelling peculiarities of textual CMC.

Nigerian CMC corpus creation criteria

The data presented in this paper are selected from a larger corpus of **I**nformal **N**igerian **E**lectronic **C**ommunication (INEC). Apart from being the acronym for an on-going linguistic project at the University of Osnabrück in Germany, INEC resonates well with Nigerians especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century because that is the same acronym as Nigeria's electoral agency. While there is a deliberate play on the acronym, the choice also indicates that the corpus is authentically Nigerian. Its composition began as this author was looking for authentic informal written data by Nigerians to illustrate certain linguistic phenomena in use of languages by Nigerians. By lurking online in several Nigerian discussion forums and weblogs for a couple of months, the author was convinced that the World Wide Web offers interesting and inspiring data for linguistic investigation. INEC thus comprises systematically but intermittently trawled and culled synchronous and asynchronous data from numerous representative Nigerian personal emails, listservs, online discussion forums, instant messaging, Web 2.0 technologies and SMS text messages. Some INEC data display *hybridity with humour* just as the concept of playfulness adopted for building the corpus is anchored on two principles: playful expressivity (Danet, 1995, 2001) and text-based linguistic creativity. The first incorporates any one of three essential features of playfulness: spontaneity, manifest joy and a sense of humour (Lieberman, 1977: 6) while the second principle combines creativity with speech simulation. Danet's (2001) work on Cyberpl@y demonstrates how emotional representation integrates linguistic and socio-typographical aspects of virtual communication as *performance* by enunciating the 'overt manifestations of more or less spontaneous playfulness on the computer screen' (p. 10). Moreover, pertinent to the INEC corpus is McDowell's (1992: 139) conceptual framework of playfulness which is '[t]he creative disposition of language resources; the manipulation of formal features and processes of language to achieve striking restructuring of familiar discourse alignments'.

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Spelling peculiarities of informal CMC

The following are some of the recurrent spelling patterns in the Nigerian CMC:

1. Standard spelling eg. TXT 001: *Thanks bro, we are all doing well. God is helping us* (Received by the author on 15 November 2008 at 16:31 CET).
2. Phonetic representation *–No wahala, pls! Neva said I wont. Bt just dt, tins are a bit tight now. . . . I'll try 2 meet up* (Received on 25 November 2008 at 14:21 CET, emphasised words underlined. *Wahala* = 'problem') — TXT 002
3. Alphanumeric and rebus abbreviation *–Tnks. Hope u re nt scared of height cos u r movin up! Hop u can dance cos u v 2 celebrate. Hop u re strng, cos u v got 2 carry exces blesns 4rm nw onward, hpp new yr* (Sent by a fellow Nigerian in Germany to the author on 1 January 2009 at 23:59 CET in response to the author's text message) — TXT 003
4. Clippings e.g. *pls*, *Bt* in TXT 002 and *Tnks*, *strng*, *nw*, *hpp*, *yr* in TXT 003.
5. Ideograms and emoticons – e.g. TXT 004 below received on 2 June 2004 at 10:13 GMT + 1 by a Nigerian in Lagos:

   "+ "). "+. "+. "+. " + ". (" + ".
   .+ *BRIGHT DAY* +'
   ", +' " . '+ ". ' + " +.
   * *May Ur Day* * *Be Bright Like Stars & May GOD Grant U Favor Always*,
   + ***Amen*** +

These are not unrelated to similar features that have been discussed by Awonusi (2004a), Chiluwa (2008), Deuber & Hinrichs (2007) and Taiwo (2008).

Table 1: Realisations of consonants by Hausa speakers of NigE

/p/	[p], [f], [Φ]
/f/	[f], [p], [Φ]
/b/	[b], [v]
/v/	[v], [b]
/ð /	[ð], [z]
/θ/	[θ], [s]

Phonological shibboleths and Nigerian English

Shibboleth, biblically, refers to a phonological test word in Judges Chapter 12 for in-group/out-group identification or social stratification. The ability to properly pronounce the fricative /ʃ/ in that word is indexical of social identity. Today, shibboleth is associated with pronunciation patterns that indicate one's national, regional or ethnic origin. It is in this sense of depicting regional accents or ethnic variations in NigE that the term 'phonological shibboleth' is used here. As part of its nativisation and standardisation, NigE phonetically and phonologically aggregates some indexical features of Nigerian indigenous languages, especially those of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. In fact, Bamgbose's (1971: 42) observations almost four decades ago are still relevant in characterising indexical features in spoken NigE.:

> The greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerians is the sound systems of the vernacular languages. Most of the phonetic characteristics in the English language of Nigerians can, of course, be traced to the transfer of features from their first language. Many people claim that they can tell what part of the country a Nigerian belongs to from the way he speaks English.

Moreover, regional accents of NigE are products of a number of other factors: historical differences in the time and manner of exposure to the English language and the pedagogical practices of its instructors, which vary from one region of Nigeria to another. Nonetheless, the NigE continuum forms a cluster of regional and social varieties (Jibril, 1986). Compared to RP, NigE has fewer vowels and some consonants are realised differently regionally. As shown in our CMC data, the regional variations are mostly accentuated in consonants. For instance Tables 1, 2 and 3 are some of the consonantal variations in Hausa, Igbo and

Table 2: Igbo realisations of some consonants of NigE

/θ/	[θ], [t], [t̪]
/ð /	[ð], [d], [d̪]
/h^{j}/ (e.g. *human*)	[h]
/p^{j}/ (e.g. *pupil*)	[p]

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Table 3: Yoruba realisations of some consonants of NigE

/v/	[v], [f]
/θ/	[θ], [t], [t̪]
/ð/	[ð], [d], [d̪]
/dʒ/	[dʒ], [ʒ]
/tʃ/	[ʧ], [ʃ]
/h/	[h], h-deletion
/z/	[z], [s]
/v/	[v], [f]

Yoruba English respectively (adapted from Jibril, 1986; Gut, 2004).

These variations support the argument that NigE phonetically and phonologically aggregates some indexical features of Nigerian indigenous languages. They are also in line with Simo Bobda's (2007: 297) observation that '[t]aking RP as a reference, NigE shares a wide range of its rules, does not apply some, applies others differently, and sometimes has rules not found in RP'. Turning to our CMC data, it should be mentioned that a speech-like spelling pattern has already been reported in the consonantal representation of some Hausa speakers of English, as Awonusi's (2004b: 211) comments suggest : '[i]t has also been found out that, in writings by Hausa speakers, some **p**-words are spelt as **f** in English, e.g. *defuty governor*; *flaza cinema*, *flatter*, *we are fraying*, etc.' He adds that '[s]uch cases provide examples of phonological spelling'. These assertions are not only consistent with findings from our CMC data, but imply that the writing of some Hausa speakers is considerably influenced by the way they speak the English language. Such pronunciation-induced spellings may reflect the educational status of such writers (which is presumed low as this does not reflect the writings of well-educated Hausa people).

Shibboleths in weblog: context and content

Please refer to the screenshot of the principal weblog for this study. Weblog (blog for short) as a genre of CMC is a diary-like website with the distinctive formatting feature of reverse chronological journalling. The authors of blogs are known as bloggers and blogging, therefore, is *the act* of writing online journals to chronicle and communicate one's thoughts (on issues of personal interests, events and news) to either a specific target audience or the wider reading public (Ifukor, 2010). Blogs can be classified into one of three major types: filters, personal journals and k-logs (Herring et al., 2005). Filter blogs primarily contain observations and evaluations of external, predominantly public events; personal journals are used to report events in the blogger's life as well as the blogger's cognitive states; and k-logs (short for knowledge blogs) focus on information and observations focused around an external topic, project or product (e.g. software or a research project). Personal journal blog types are the most common of the three and these are the ones included in INEC. As mentioned earlier, CMC textual data are used to convey and exchange Internet interlocutors' thoughts, opinions, observations, feelings as well as messages from other people or sources. The author of the blog post under consideration (Odukoya, 2007) uses the blogosphere to relay a lighthearted message sent to his personal email account but acknowledges that the content is fictional. The URL is: http://www.tayoodukoya.com/2007/05/acceptance-speech-of-president-elect. The html was composed on 5 May 2007 with the title 'Acceptance Speech of the President Elect':

> Sank you, sank you, my pellow Naijurians por ze goodwill messages.
>
> I want to sank you por not boting por me as fresident of ze Pederal Refublic of Naijuria. But I received ze most imfortant botes prom Fresident Obasanjo and INEC. Zis is why I have now been declared ze winner of ze elections and ze fresident-elect of ze Pederal Refublic of Naijuria. Nagode to Obasanjo and nagode to INEC, for zia beri beri imfortant suffort.
>
> Ze pirst task of my new gwament is to fray por feace and stability in Naijuria. I will now ask all ze depeated fresidential candidates to join me in a gwament of national unity. So I will bring back my friends like Atiku, General Babangida and Buhari into my new gwament.
>
> I sink Atiku will be good as ze new head of ze EFCC. Fresident Obasanjo should not worry about my gwament frobing him, gaskiya, at least until apter May 29. Babangida will be ze new minister por pinance, and Buhari will be in charge of ze ministry of War Against Indiscifline.
>
> My fipul, ze task bepore us is a great one, walahi talahi. I don't know where to start, but I want to ashuwa you zat I will act in consultation with all ze emirs and imams.

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I am now going to Germany por treatment por exhaustion prom making zis sfeech. I shall be back por ze swearing in ceremony, inshallah.

One Nigeria, one Fee-Di-Fee, Fower to ze fipul.

Umaru Yar'Adua

Fresident-Elect

[Meanings: *nagode* 'thanks', *gaskiya* 'honestly', *Fee-Di-Fee* 'P-D-P']

The Fictional Speech in Standard Spelling

Thank you, **th**ank you, my **f**ellow **Nigerians f**or **th**e goodwill messages.

I want to **th**ank you **f**or not **v**oting **f**or me as **p**resident of **th**e **F**ederal Re**p**ublic of **Nigeria**. But I received **th**e most im**p**ortant **v**otes **f**rom **P**resident Obasanjo and INEC. **Th**is is why I have now been declared **th**e winner of **th**e elections and **th**e **p**resident-elect of **th**e **F**ederal Re**p**ublic of **Nigeria**. ***Thanks*** to Obasanjo and ***thanks*** to INEC, for **their v**er**y v**er**y** im**p**ortant su**pp**ort.

The **f**irst task of my new **government** is to **p**ray **f**or **p**eace and stability in **Nigeria**. I will now ask all **th**e de**f**eated **p**residential candidates to join me in a **government** of national unity. So I will bring back my **f**riends like Atiku, General Babangida and Buhari into my new **government**.

I **th**ink Atiku will be good as **th**e new head of **th**e EFCC. **P**resident Obasanjo should not worry about my **government p**robing him, ***frankly speaking***, at least until a**f**ter May 29. Babangida will be **th**e new minister **f**or **f**inance, and Buhari will be in charge of **th**e ministry of War Against Indisci**p**line.

My **people**, **th**e task be**f**ore us is a great one, ***honestly***. I don't know where to start, but I want to **assure** you **th**at I will act in consultation with all **th**e emirs and imams.

I am now going to Germany **f**or treatment **f**or exhaustion **f**rom making **th**is s**p**eech. I shall be back **f**or **th**e swearing in ceremony, ***God willing***.

One Nigeria, one **P**-D-**P**, **P**ower to **th**e **people**.

Umaru Yar'Adua

President-Elect

It should be noted that the blog post is situated within the Nigerian 2007 General Elections discourse. The 2007 elections were a landmark transitional event because they marked the first time in the country's history that one civilian government was handing over the baton of power to another civilian government. Elections for the 36 State Governors and 990 Legislators in the 36 State Houses of Assembly were held on 14 April 2007 and elections for the President of Nigeria, 109 Members of the Senate and 360 Members of the House of Representatives took place on 21 April 2007. With copious evidence, local and international election observers reported several voting irregularities leading to a lukewarm reception of the results by the Nigerian masses and the eventual legal disputes that have trailed the results ever since. Some of them were still being nullified by the courts three years after the exercise. The winner of the presidential election was Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, a former academic specialist in Analytical Chemistry, from Katsina State, northern Nigeria. Although he was sworn in on 29 May 2009, his ascension to the presidency as the democratically and legally elected President was affirmed by the Nigerian Supreme Court on 12 December 2008, almost 20 months after the presidential election.

The fictional speech does not in any way reflect the regular spoken English of former President Yar'Adua. He spoke fluent and internationally intelligible English and actually approximated RP more than most Nigerians, but, like many Nigerians, he was a multilingual with Fulfulde, Hausa and English prominently in his linguistic repertoire and when he spoke English it was easy to tell that he was from northern Nigeria. The speech accentuates pronunciation features of some educated Hausa speakers of NigE, as cited in table 1.

Casual speech features in informal CMC

The dichotomy between casual and careful spoken English by Nigerians is highlighted in our CMC data as the primary blog post for this paper simulates the former. The speech contained in the blog depicts some peculiarities of informal CMC writings. However, the standard spelling rendition of it has been provided. The speech is composed with a lot of pronunciation-induced spellings as part of the accentuation of shibboleths in the spoken English of some educated northern Nigerians. The consonantal peculiarities of spoken Hausa English accentuated in the blog post have a higher frequency word-initially as follows (using RP phonemes as the base for projecting the corresponding spoken realisations) :

/p/ → [f]

Word-initially

fresident, fresident-elect, fresidential, fray, feace, frobing, fipul, Fee-Di-Fee, Fower

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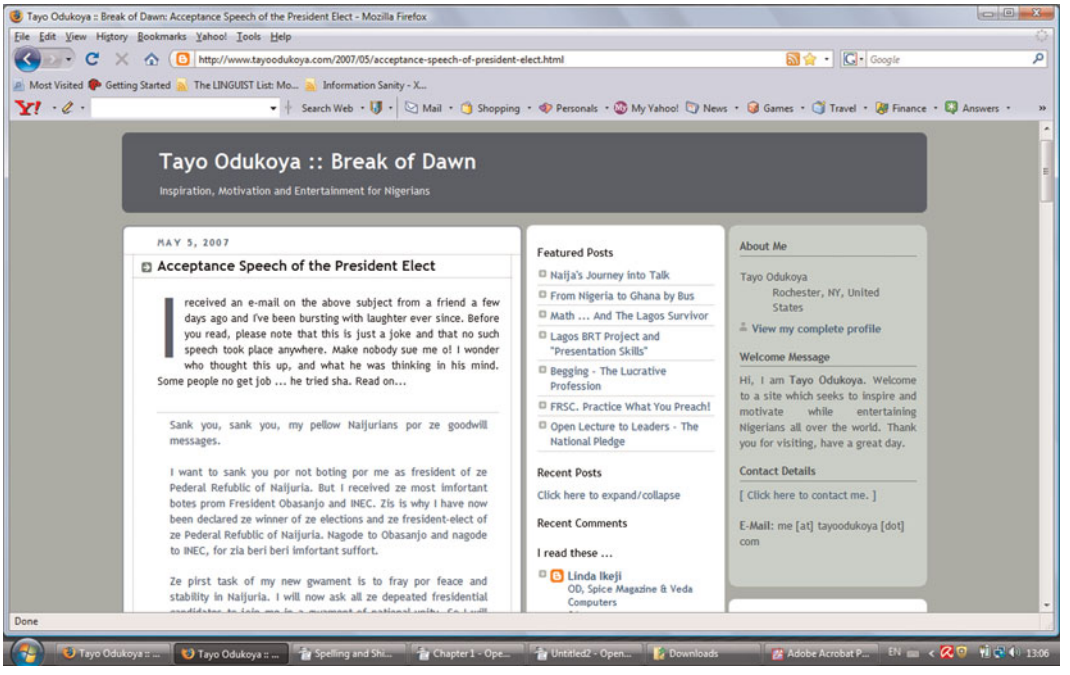

Intervocalically (i.e. between vowels)
suffort

Word-medially
repubflic, imfortant, Indiscifline, sfeech

/f/ → [p]
Word-initially
pellow, por, Pederal, prom, pirst, friends, pinance

Intervocalically
depeated, bepore

Word-medially
apter

/v/ → [b]
boting, botes, beri

/ð / → [z]
ze, zia, zat, zis

/θ/ → [s]
sank, sink

The only pair not reflected in the speech is the /b/ → [b] or [v] variants. However, *Nigerian* is realised thus: /naɪdʒɪrɪən/ → /naɪdʒurɪan/ highlighting the accentuated rules /ɪ/ → [u] and /ɪə/ → [ɪa] in the middle and final syllables respectively.

There are two interesting examples of phonetic re-spelling: *ashuwa* and *gwament*. And there are Hausa lexical items to flavour the speech: *nagode* (thank you) and *gaskiya* (honestly). The phrase *walahi talahi* (frankly speaking) and *inshallah* (God willing) are part of the vocabulary of northern Nigerians.

The blog readers' responses suggest that the blog post is taken for what it actually is – a jovial simulation of casual speech:

~**Mimi**~ said...
Lol ... I can imagine how many good jokes will come out of this one

Fee Di Fee!!!!!!! Frogress!!! LMAO

akin aworan said...
Yeye joker!! :-)

Niyi said...
hahahahahaha.. that was hilarious.

catwalq said...
u guys are naughty.
who sat down to make this one now?

truth said...
hey Tayo. That was hilarious. who 'stewed' that up? good read though.

Anonymous said...
lmao that was so funny lol

aloted said...
Roflol..this is so funny...ah! I hope our new

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president will not be giving speeches like this in real life o!!! LOL

Aloofa said. . .

So Funny. Whoever did that must be really weird.

Conclusion

Spelling systems are attempts to simulate human language or communication patterns and it has been argued that the twin factors of digitally-aided freedom of expression and linguistic economy constrain the spelling peculiarities of textual CMC. As illustrated in the foregoing, NigE phonologically aggregates some indexical features of Nigerian indigenous languages and CMC spelling can simulate NigE regional pronunciation patterns. Nigerian CMC data like the ones presented in this paper provide real data for the teaching and investigation of linguistic phenomena in NigE. Although the data exhibit features of humour and informality, these do not in any way downplay the reality and characteristics of regional accents (and perhaps idiolectal variations) in NigE. Playful CMC data therefore can simulate abstract psychological language processes and accentuate the underlying representations of sound segments (or lack of them) in lects of NigE. Researchers and instructors of varieties of English can now turn to CMC data as pedagogical examples for illustrating linguistic phenomena they teach. On a lighter note, some of the phonological features of regional accents of NigE which speakers are not normally conscious of will resonate as the playful shibboleths' simulation is presented to them or when they read the text themselves. This further strengthens the argument that some CMC platforms are avenues for deliberations on and discussions about real issues in the real world (Crystal, 2001: 171).

Endnote

The permission of the blog author was sought and received by email before discussing it in this paper. URLs last checked on 30 July 2009.

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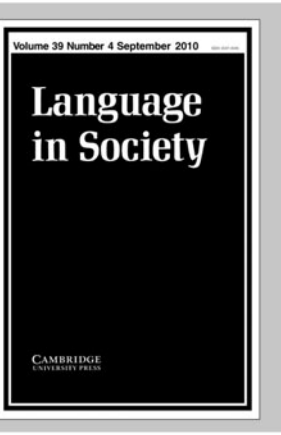

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