

'CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME': IDENTIFICATION OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH IDIOMS

NTEKIM-REX Yewande

Department of English,
University of Lagos.

Abstract

This study examines the Nigerian sociocultural factors that shape the use of idioms in Nigerian English (NE), arguing that the idioms which thrive in constant everyday use are precisely those with deep roots in Nigerian languages and cultures. Using data collected from social events within the Lagos metropolis (including wedding receptions, traditional wedding ceremonies, and comedy shows) and applying the test of compositionality, the study identifies which idioms appear most frequently in the speech of Masters of ceremonies, comedians, and wedding hosts. A total of 156 validated idioms were analysed. The findings reveal that MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts overwhelmingly prefer idioms that draw from Nigerian indigenous languages and cultural practices. Deeply embedded Nigerian Indigenous Language idioms account for 68.4% of all NE origin idioms observed and appear an average of 12.4 times per event, while loosely embedded SBE idioms appear less than once per event. Three sociocultural factors contribute to idiom vitality: shared cultural knowledge across ethnic groups, social bonding functions, and rhetorical force rooted in lived Nigerian experience. Metaphors and rules transferred from Nigerian languages (including the body as a moral map, situational appropriateness, and the compression of proverbs into idioms) systematically shape NE idiom use. The study concludes that the metaphoric "charity" of NE idioms begins at home, in the traditional Nigerian languages and cultures of the speakers. A good knowledge of Nigerian languages and cultures is therefore a vital tool for fully grasping idioms in NE.

Keywords: Nigerian English, idioms, sociocultural factors, cultural embeddedness, nativisation, compositionality.

Résumé

Cette étude examine les facteurs socioculturels nigériens qui influencent l'usage des expressions idiomatiques en anglais nigérian (NE), en soutenant que les expressions qui s'imposent dans le langage courant sont précisément celles qui sont profondément ancrées dans les langues et les cultures nigérianes. À partir de données recueillies lors d'événements sociaux dans la métropole de Lagos (notamment des réceptions de mariage, des cérémonies de mariage traditionnelles et des spectacles d'humour) et en appliquant le test de compositionnalité, l'étude identifie les expressions idiomatiques qui apparaissent le plus fréquemment dans le discours des maîtres de cérémonie, des humoristes et des animateurs de mariage. Au total, 156 expressions idiomatiques validées ont été analysées. Les résultats révèlent que les maîtres de cérémonie, les humoristes et les animateurs de mariage préfèrent massivement les expressions

idiomatiques issues des langues et des pratiques culturelles autochtones nigérianes. Les expressions idiomatiques profondément ancrées dans les langues autochtones nigérianes représentent 68,4 % de toutes les expressions idiomatiques d'origine NE observées et apparaissent en moyenne 12,4 fois par événement, tandis que les expressions idiomatiques SBE faiblement ancrées apparaissent moins d'une fois par événement. Trois facteurs socioculturels contribuent à la vitalité des expressions idiomatiques : les connaissances culturelles partagées entre les groupes ethniques, les fonctions de cohésion sociale et la force rhétorique ancrée dans l'expérience nigériane vécue. Les métaphores et les règles issues des langues nigérianes (notamment le corps en tant que carte morale, l'adéquation situationnelle et la condensation des proverbes en expressions idiomatiques) façonnent systématiquement l'usage des expressions idiomatiques du NE. L'étude conclut que la « charité » métaphorique des expressions idiomatiques du NE commence chez soi, dans les langues traditionnelles nigérianes

Mots-clés : anglais nigérian, expressions idiomatiques, facteurs socioculturels, ancrage culturel, nativisation, compositionnalité.

Introduction

There is a common saying in Nigeria: charity begins at home. What this means is that the most enduring and impactful forms of support, care, and development originate from within one's immediate environment rather than from outside. This paper extends that logic to the study of idioms in Nigerian English (NE). The idioms that survive, thrive, and enjoy constant use in everyday Nigerian discourse are not those imported from Standard British English (SBE) and taught through pedantic classroom methods. Rather, they are the ones whose meanings are rooted in the languages, cultures, and social practices of the Nigerian people.

Idioms are expressions whose figurative meanings cannot always be predicted from the literal meanings of their constituent words. To understand an idiom, a speaker needs more than vocabulary and grammar. He needs cultural knowledge — the shared rules for communication, interaction, and interpretation that define a speech community. Culture is what an individual needs to function well in a community, and knowing the meaning of an idiom requires knowing the culture in which it is embedded. This is why a Nigerian listener instantly understands an idiom drawn from Yoruba or Igbo cultural practices, while the same listener may find a comparable SBE idiom distant or awkward.

Observations from social events across the Lagos metropolis reveal a clear pattern. Masters of Ceremony (MCs) at weddings, comedians performing before live audiences, and hosts at traditional ceremonies overwhelmingly prefer idioms that draw from Nigerian indigenous languages and cultural practices. These idioms are not only understood instantly by audiences but also carry rhetorical force, humour, and emotional weight that SBE idioms cannot replicate. An MC who says "He has put leg" (meaning he has intervened or meddled) gets laughter and nodding heads. The same MC who says "He has put his foot in it" (an SBE idiom meaning he has made an embarrassing mistake) would confuse his audience and lose their attention. The difference is not accidental. It is cultural.

This paper argues that the metaphoric "charity" of NE idioms begins at home — in the traditional Nigerian languages and cultures of the speakers. The idioms that enjoy constant use are precisely those with deep roots in Nigerian sociocultural practices. Conversely, SBE idioms that lack these roots are used less frequently, understood less readily, and often avoided altogether by speakers who are otherwise fluent in English.

There is a further observation, corroborated by other scholars, that idioms are best learnt and usage skills acquired when taught alongside the culture in which the idiom is rooted. The lack of use of SBE idioms among Nigerians may not be unconnected with the methodology for teaching idioms in Nigerian schools, which is pedantic at best. Idioms are presented as fixed lists to be memorised, isolated from context, and divorced from the cultural life of the people who created them. This approach does not work. It produces learners who can define an idiom on an examination paper but cannot deploy it appropriately in conversation.

| This study therefore, examines the Nigerian sociocultural factors that shape the use of idioms in NE. Using data collected from social events — weddings, comedy performances, and MC speeches — and applying the test of compositionality, the paper identifies which idioms appear most frequently in these contexts and asks why.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To identify the Nigerian sociocultural factors that contribute to the vitality of certain idioms in NE.
- ii. To examine how metaphors and rules transferred from Nigerian languages shape idiom use in every-day social events.
- iii. To determine the relationship between cultural embeddedness and frequency of use among MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts.

Background

Language, Culture, and Idioms

Language is a reflection of culture, and some linguists see culture as being reflected in language. Therefore, in identifying or characterising a dialect, the role of the cultural context is significant. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language determines thought and perception. What these early grammarians were not aware of in their time were the issues of language transfer and imposition of colonisation, which both lead to language and cultural imposition. A change in language may change our expression of things in nature, but not necessarily our cosmos, which is already a product of the environment in which we acquire our first language.

Moreover, users of a foreign language are often faced with what Adetugbo (1977) referred to as cultural interference. He argued that the relationship between language and culture is that they are inseparable. Therefore, it is very easy to transfer meanings from the First Language (L1) to the Second Language (L2) to express cultural patterns, values, ideas, concepts, and situations that are different or non-existent in the English native environment. NE cannot but exhibit features of the cultural life and patterns of social behaviour of the people who use it—features which Adetugbo (1977) emphasized are not mere deviations from the norm but characterize standard NE.

Nigerian English as a Distinct Variety

The emergence of NE is a predictable development of language contact—a natural response to pressing linguistic and socio-cultural needs. English has had to share functions with indigenous languages, creating a need to express new ideas and modes of thought unavailable in

the native variety. Several linguists have examined factors responsible for the emergence of NE. Adekunle (1974) argued that because English is in a new ethnolinguistic environment, its contact with local Nigerian languages and speech habits results in its assimilation into local culture. Banjo (1971) also argued that English cannot be a linguistic island, so it must react and adapt to its new social and linguistic environment.

NE reflects the influences of the various indigenous languages in the country, even though some are more significant than others. Despite variations inherent in the English spoken by Nigerians from different linguistic zones (Eastern, Western, and Northern), linguists have described certain characteristic features of NE that cut across these zones (Adetugbo, 1979; Bamgbose, Banjo, & Thomas, 1995).

Sociocultural Factors and Idiom Vitality

In an L2 situation like Nigeria, one significant factor responsible for language variation is socio-cultural in nature. In the first instance, there are over 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Idioms in the different ethnic groups are different, but they still have a lot in common. These common grounds are found in the speech patterns of near-native speakers, whose speech patterns form the yardstick for measuring standard NE. The wisdom contained in such idioms is common to the significant contributing languages of NE. So one finds that such idioms are easily identifiable by most NE speakers, irrespective of the region they are from. The standpoint of sociolinguistics is that language is an open living system that depends on its external environment. Hymes (1972) suggested that communicative competence depends on tacit knowledge and ability for use: the knowledge of language in actual use and the actual use of language in concrete situations. This means that social and cultural knowledge play a part in the use and interpretation of linguistic forms. In using idioms in NE, the speaker relies on his knowledge of his culture and that of English and tries to find a common ground that best expresses his meaning. This corroborates Adetugbo's (1977) view that the socio-cultural milieu in which a speech act takes place gives it its total meaning.

What has not been sufficiently explored in the literature is why some idioms thrive in every-day NE usage while others do not. Observations

from social events suggest that MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts overwhelmingly prefer idioms drawn from Nigerian indigenous languages and cultural practices. These idioms are understood instantly by audiences and carry rhetorical force that SBE idioms cannot replicate. This paper argues that the idioms which survive and enjoy constant use are precisely those with deep roots in Nigerian languages and cultures.

Teaching Idioms in the Nigerian Classroom

There is a further observation, corroborated by scholars of second language acquisition, that idioms are best learnt and usage skills acquired when taught alongside the culture in which the idiom is rooted. Irujo (1986a, 1986b, 1993) demonstrated that L2 learners perform better with idioms that have conceptual equivalents in their L1 and that transfer plays a significant role in idiom comprehension. Similarly, Boers (2011, 2020) has shown that presenting idioms in meaningful cultural contexts enhances retention and appropriate use.

The lack of use of SBE idioms among Nigerians may not be unconnected with the methodology for teaching idioms in Nigerian schools, which is pedantic at best. Teachers of English in Nigeria mostly avoid teaching idioms even at the secondary school level. When idioms are taught, they are mostly isolated from the context of usage and the culture of the users because such teachers have never been a part of the English culture. This approach produces learners who can define an idiom on an examination paper but cannot deploy it appropriately in conversation. The result is that SBE idioms remain foreign and unused, while Nigerian Indigenous Language (NIL) -influenced idioms (learnt organically through participation in social events) flourish.

Studies on NE Idioms

Several scholars have examined idioms in NE. Adegbija (2003) studied idiomatic variation in NE, noting the influence of Nigerian languages on the form and meaning of idioms. Igboanusi (2001) compiled a dictionary of Nigerian English that includes many idiomatic expressions. Okoro (2004a, 2004b) addressed the challenges of codifying and identifying standard NE usage. However, none of these studies focused specifically on why certain idioms thrive in every-day social events while others remain peripheral. Nor have they examined the role of MCs, comedians,

and wedding hosts as gatekeepers of idiomatic vitality. This study addresses these gaps.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, corpus-based research design. Qualitative because idioms carry figurative and culturally specific meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone, while the corpus-based dimension allows for systematic collection, categorization, and analysis of naturally occurring idiomatic expressions. The study is also descriptive and analytical, as it seeks to identify the sociocultural factors that shape idiom use in NE and to examine why certain idioms thrive in everyday social events.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily grounded in Cognitive Semantics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1984), which provides tools for analysing how figurative meanings emerge from metaphorical and metonymic processes. It draws on theories of conceptual metaphor and semantic redeployment (Cacciari, 1993) and the Compositional Theory (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989), which distinguishes between decomposable and non-decomposable idioms. The study also incorporates insights from Pragmatics (Hymes, 1972; Glucksberg, 1993) and the Sociolinguistics of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Bangbose, 1995) to situate NE as a distinct variety shaped by language contact and nativisation.

Data Sources

The primary source of data for this research is taken from a larger research project on the identification of NE idioms used in the author's previous studies. However, unlike those studies which drew heavily from literary texts, the present study focuses primarily on spoken data from social events. The data sources are as follows:

Social Events (Primary): Idioms were collected from observed social events within the Lagos metropolis, including wedding receptions, traditional wedding ceremonies, comedy shows, and other public gatherings where MCs, comedians, and hosts were actively using language to engage audiences. The audience is a mixed one: composing

people from at least the West, who are Yoruba speakers; the East, who are speakers of Igbo, Edo,, and speakers of different dialects from the South. The researcher physically observed these events and documented idioms in use through participant observation and with the aid of discreetly-placed electronic devices, which were later transcribed.

Literary Texts (Secondary): To supplement the spoken data and to verify the idiomatic status of expressions, selected literary texts by Nigerian authors were also consulted. These include works by Achebe, Soyinka, Adimora-Ezeigbo, Alkali, Eghagha, and Rotimi. However, the emphasis in analysis is placed on idioms that appear in both spoken and written contexts, with priority given to those observed in actual use at social events.

Verification Sources: Candidate idioms were verified against selected texts on English idioms and dictionaries of SBE idioms. Expressions that could not be verified in SBE sources were checked against recognised texts on NE (Igboanusi, 2001; Okoro, 2004a, 2004b) and against their frequency of occurrence in the observed social events.

Sampling and Selection Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of social events. Events were selected based on the following criteria:

Table 1

Criteria for Idiom selection

Criterion	Justification
Presence of an MC, comedian, or host	These individuals are primary producers of idiomatic language in public events
Mix of event types	Weddings, comedy shows, and traditional ceremonies represent different speech situations
Location	Lagos metropolis ensures exposure to speakers from multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
Natural occurrence	Only events where language was used spontaneously (not scripted) were included

A total of fifteen social events were observed over a period of six months. These included eight wedding receptions, four traditional

wedding ceremonies, and three comedy shows. From these events, approximately 200 candidate idiomatic expressions were initially recorded.

Determining Idiomatic Status

Each candidate expression was subjected to four tests to determine whether it qualified as an idiom:

- > Compositionality test: Is the expression a word or phrase whose meaning may or may not be deduced from the meaning of its constituent words?
- > Literal/figurative test: Do the constituent words have both literal and figurative meanings?
- > Relational test: What is the relationship between the constituent words and the figurative meaning?
- > Lexicographic verification: Is the expression listed in identified dictionaries of SBE idioms or in any of the identified texts on NE?

Expressions that satisfied at least three of the four tests were retained for further analysis. This process yielded 156 validated idioms.

Source Identification

Following the determination of idiomatic status, each expression was assigned a source based on the following procedure:

Table 2

Source Assignment

Verification Outcome	Source Assigned
Expression verified in SBE idiom dictionaries	SBE origin
Expression not verified in SBE dictionaries but found in NE texts, media, or social events.	NE origin (presumed transfer from Nigerian languages)

Classification of Idioms by Cultural Embeddedness

Beyond source identification, idioms were further classified according to their degree of cultural embeddedness. This classification emerged inductively from the data and reflects the central argument of this study:

Table 3

Classification of idioms by degree of Cultural Embeddedness

Category	Description	Example
Deeply embedded	Idioms whose meaning depends entirely on Nigerian cultural practices, proverbs, or social norms	"He has put leg" (intervened)
Moderately embedded	Idioms that draw from Nigerian languages but have rough parallels in SBE	"She is in state" (pregnant)
Loosely embedded	SBE idioms that are understood and occasionally used by NE speakers but lack cultural resonance	"Break the ice"

For the purposes of this study, special attention is given to deeply embedded idioms, as these are the ones that appear most frequently in the speech of MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis proceeded in the following sequential steps:

Step Procedure

- 1 Transcription of recorded speech from social events
- 2 Identification and extraction of candidate idiomatic expressions
- 3 Application of the four tests to determine idiomatic status
- 4 Verification of source through lexicographic checks
- 5 Classification of confirmed idioms into cultural embeddedness categories
- 6 Frequency analysis of which idioms appear most often across events and speakers
- 7 Interpretation of findings in light of the theoretical framework

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the findings, multiple verification methods were employed. First, the idiomatic status of each expression was confirmed using four distinct tests. Second, source attribution was cross-checked against multiple reference works. Third, expressions observed at social events were triangulated against usage in literary texts and media to confirm that they represent living, current usage rather than idiosyncratic

or one-time productions. Fourth, only idioms that appeared in at least three separate events were included in the final analysis to ensure that they represent patterns of use rather than isolated occurrences.

Ethical Considerations

All idiomatic expressions collected from social events were recorded anonymously. No identifying information about individual speakers is included in the data or in this paper. Attendees at public events were aware that recording was taking place, and the researcher ensured that no private conversations were recorded. Literary texts are published works and are cited appropriately. No sensitive or personally identifiable information is reported.

Results

A total of 156 validated idioms were identified from the fifteen observed social events, comprising eight wedding receptions, four traditional wedding ceremonies, and three comedy shows. Of these, 98 idioms (62.8%) were classified as NE origin (influenced by Nigerian Indigenous Languages), while 58 idioms (37.2%) were classified as SBE origin. This distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 4
Distribution of Idioms by Source Across Social Events

Event Type	NE Origin (NIL)	SBE Origin	Total
Wedding receptions (8 events)	52	28	80
Traditional wedding ceremonies (4 events)	31	15	46
Comedy shows (3 events)	15	15	30
Total	98 (62.8%)	58 (37.2%)	156

As Table 4 shows, NE origin idioms predominate across all three event types, but the contrast is most striking at traditional wedding ceremonies, where NIL idioms account for 67.4% of all idioms used. Comedy shows show the smallest gap, with NIL and SBE idioms appearing equally (15 each). This is likely because comedians sometimes deliberately use SBE

idioms for humorous effect, often by juxtaposing them with NIL expressions.

Frequency of Idioms by Cultural Embeddedness

When the NE origin idioms (98 in total) were further classified according to cultural embeddedness, the following distribution emerged, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Distribution of NE Origin Idioms by Cultural Embeddedness

Category	Number	Percentage	Typical User
Deeply embedded	67	68.4%	MCs, wedding hosts
Moderately embedded	24	24.5%	MCs, comedians
Loosely embedded	7	7.1%	Comedians
Total	98	100%	

Deeply embedded idioms account for over two-thirds (68.4%) of all NE origin idioms observed. These are idioms whose meaning depends entirely on Nigerian cultural practices, proverbs, or social norms. They appear most frequently in the speech of MCs and wedding hosts, particularly at traditional wedding ceremonies. Examples of deeply embedded idioms observed across multiple events include:

Table 6
Deeply embedded idioms observed across multiple events

Idiom	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning (as used by MCs/hosts)
"He has put leg"	He placed his foot	He has intervened, meddled, or become involved
"She is in state"	She is in a condition	She is pregnant
"Long throat"	Extended throat	Greed, especially regarding food
"Wash brain"	Clean the brain	To deceive or manipulate

"See road"	Perceive the path	To have an opportunity or a way forward
"Pour libation"	Pour a ritual drink	To apologise profusely or make amends

Moderately embedded idioms (24.5%) draw from Nigerian languages but have rough parallels in SBE. These were used by both MCs and comedians, often interchangeably with SBE equivalents. Examples include:

Table 7

Moderately embedded idioms draw from Nigerian languages

Idiom	Figurative Meaning	SBE Parallel
"Sit on the fence"	Remain neutral	Same (but less frequent in NE contexts)
"Open mouth"	Be generous or careless with talk	"Loose lips"
"Carry last"	Be the worst or finish last	"Come in last"

Loosely embedded idioms (7.1%) are SBE idioms that appeared occasionally in the speech of comedians. These were seldom used by MCs at weddings or traditional ceremonies. Examples include "break the ice," "spill the beans," and "kick the bucket." Their low frequency (7 out of 156 total idioms, or 4.5% of all observed idioms) supports the argument that SBE idioms without cultural anchoring in Nigerian life are rarely used in everyday social discourse.

MCs, Comedians, and Wedding Hosts: Distinct Patterns

A notable finding is the difference in idiomatic preferences across speaker types. Table 3 presents the percentage of deeply embedded NIL idioms used by each group.

Table 8
Use of Deeply Embedded NIL Idioms by Speaker Type

Speaker Type	Percentage of utterances containing deeply embedded NIL idioms
Wedding hosts (traditional ceremonies)	78%
MCs (wedding receptions)	72%
Comedians	34%

Wedding hosts at traditional ceremonies use deeply embedded NIL idioms most frequently (78% of their idiomatic utterances). MCs at wedding receptions follow closely at 72%. Comedians, by contrast, use deeply embedded NIL idioms only 34% of the time, preferring instead a mix of moderately embedded NIL idioms and SBE idioms, often for comedic contrast.

Comparison with Literary Text Data

To determine whether the patterns observed at social events reflect living usage rather than performance-specific choices, the 156 idioms from social events were compared with idioms appearing in the ten literary texts by Nigerian authors used in previous studies. The comparison revealed that 82% of the deeply embedded NIL idioms observed at social events also appear in at least three of the literary texts. This suggests a convergence between spoken and written NE, with the spoken domain leading in the frequency and vitality of deeply embedded idioms.

However, the reverse was not true. Of the SBE idioms appearing frequently in literary texts (such as "break the ice," "spill the beans," and "kick the bucket"), only 12% appeared at any social event, and none appeared in more than two events. This finding is significant. It indicates that while Nigerian literary authors continue to use SBE idioms in their writing — perhaps because of editorial pressures or because they are writing for an international audience — these same idioms are largely absent from the spontaneous speech of MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm a clear and consistent pattern: the idioms that thrive in everyday Nigerian English are those with deep roots in Nigerian languages and cultures, and the frequency of their use is directly proportional to their degree of cultural embeddedness. This discussion interprets each finding in turn and draws out the implications for the study of NE idioms, for teaching methodology, and for the broader field of World Englishes.

Sociocultural Factors Contributing to Idiom Vitality

Finding One identified three sociocultural factors that contribute to idiom vitality: shared cultural knowledge, social bonding functions, and rhetorical force rooted in lived experience.

Shared Cultural Knowledge. The fact that deeply embedded idioms are understood across Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa speakers — even when the specific linguistic source differs — suggests that NE has developed a pan-Nigerian idiomatic repertoire. This repertoire is not simply the sum of three or more ethnic traditions. It is a new creation, forged through decades of language contact, inter-ethnic marriage, urbanization, and shared media. An idiom like "put leg" may have originated in one language community, but it now belongs to all NE speakers. This finding extends Adekunle's (1974) observation that English in Nigeria has been assimilated into local culture. What the present study adds is that the assimilation has produced a shared idiomatic commons that transcends individual ethnic boundaries.

Social Bonding Functions. The use of deeply embedded idioms to create belonging at mixed-ethnicity events points to an underexplored function of nativized idioms. Scholars of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Bamgbose, 1995) have emphasised that nativisation allows L2 speakers to express local identities and concepts. What has been less discussed is the role of nativised idioms in actively constructing solidarity among speakers from different L1 backgrounds. The MC who says "put leg" at a wedding where the bride is Yoruba and the groom is Igbo is not just using an idiom. He is performing Nigerianness. This finding suggests

that idiom vitality is not only a matter of frequency but also of social work. Idioms that do social bonding work are the ones that persist.

Rhetorical Force Rooted in Lived Experience. The finding that deeply embedded idioms carry rhetorical force because they are rooted in lived experience supports the Cognitive Semantics framework (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1984). "Long throat" is not an arbitrary expression. It is motivated by the embodied experience of desire as a sensation located in the throat. This embodiment makes the idiom more memorable, more persuasive, and more satisfying to use than a non-embodied SBE equivalent like "greedy." The implication is that idiom vitality is not random. Idioms that are conceptually motivated by universal embodied experiences, but realized through local cultural frames, have a competitive advantage.

Metaphors and Rules Transferred from Nigerian Languages

Finding Two identified three transferred metaphors and rules: the body as a moral map, situational appropriateness, and proverbs as idiom precursors.

The Body as a Moral Map. The finding that NE idioms systematically use body parts to express moral and social qualities reveals the deep cognitive influence of Nigerian languages on NE. This is not surface-level transfer of individual words. It is the transfer of a conceptual system — a way of mapping morality onto the body. Gibbs, Nayak, and Cutting (1989) argued that decomposable idioms are easier to process because their parts contribute to the whole. The present study adds that cultural decomposability matters as much as linguistic decomposability. "Put leg" is easy to process not only because "leg" and "put" relate to the meaning of intervention but also because Nigerian speakers already possess a cultural model in which the leg is the site of agency, movement, and intrusion. This cultural model is not available to a speaker of SBE. Therefore, even a compositionally transparent idiom like "put leg" would be less accessible to a speaker who lacked the cultural frame. The implication for the Compositional Theory is that cultural analysability must be considered alongside linguistic analysability.

Situational Appropriateness. The finding that MCs and wedding hosts switch between deeply embedded idioms and neutral expressions depending on the status of their addressee confirms Adetugbo's (1977) view that appropriateness is one of the biggest challenges NE users face. But the present study shows that NE users are not failing at appropriateness. They are operating by a different set of rules — rules transferred from Nigerian languages, where age, status, and relationship determine which expressions are appropriate. The MC who addresses the whole audience with "put leg" but then addresses a titled chief with a more neutral expression is not making an error. He is demonstrating communicative competence in NE. This finding challenges the deficit perspective that treats nativised features as deviations from a native norm. It supports instead the view, articulated by Bamgbose (1995) and others, that NE is a distinct variety with its own norms of appropriateness.

Proverbs as Idiom Precursors. The finding that many NE idioms are shortened forms of longer proverbs from Nigerian languages points to a generative mechanism that has not been sufficiently studied. In SBE, the relationship between proverbs and idioms is loose. In NE, it appears to be systematic. Proverbs provide the raw material; compression produces the idiom. "See road" retains the wisdom of the fuller proverb — "When the gods want to bless you, they make you see road" — even when the proverb itself is not spoken. This compression strategy is efficient for communication and rich in cultural resonance. It may also explain why NE speakers produce idioms that are more metaphorically transparent than many SBE idioms. The proverb provides a narrative frame that the compressed idiom continues to evoke.

Relationship Between Cultural Embeddedness and Frequency of Use

Finding Three demonstrated a direct, positive relationship between cultural embeddedness and frequency of use among MCs, comedians, and wedding hosts. Deeply embedded idioms appear 12.4 times per event; loosely embedded SBE idioms appear 0.8 times per event.

Why Deeply Embedded Idioms Dominate. The frequency gap is not accidental. Deeply embedded idioms dominate because they do three things that loosely embedded idioms cannot. First, they ensure instant

comprehension. The audience at a traditional wedding ceremony does not need to pause and decode "He has put leg." The meaning is immediate because the cultural frame is shared. Second, they generate an affective response. The audience laughs, nods, or murmurs in recognition. This affective response reinforces the speaker's bond with the audience and makes the event memorable. Third, they signal speaker competence. The MC who uses deeply embedded idioms fluently is perceived as skilled, authentic, and in tune with the audience. The MC who relies on SBE idioms would be perceived as distant, bookish, or out of touch. These three functions — comprehension, affect, and social evaluation — create a powerful incentive for speakers to use deeply embedded idioms and an equally powerful disincentive to use loosely embedded ones.

The Comedian Pattern. Comedians use deeply embedded idioms less frequently (34%) than MCs and wedding hosts. The discussion of Finding One might suggest that this lower frequency indicates weaker vitality. But the pattern is better explained by the different communicative goals of comedy. Comedians deliberately mix SBE idioms with NIL idioms to create surprise, contrast, and humour. A comedian who says "He tried to break the ice, but he only succeeded in putting leg" is playing with the audience's expectations — switching from a familiar SBE idiom to a deeply embedded NIL one. The humour comes from the juxtaposition. This creative mixing is itself evidence of the vitality of NIL idioms. Comedians would not use them as punchlines if audiences did not recognise them instantly. Moreover, the fact that comedians can use SBE idioms for contrast presupposes that their audiences understand those SBE idioms. Receptive knowledge of SBE idioms may be higher than productive use. Future research should investigate this distinction.

The Literary Text Contrast. The finding that 82% of deeply embedded NIL idioms from social events also appear in literary texts, while only 12% of SBE idioms from literary texts appear at social events, suggests a convergence between spoken and written NE for NIL idioms but a divergence for SBE idioms. Nigerian authors are accurately representing the living language of their society when they use NIL idioms. But they continue to use SBE idioms in their writing — perhaps because of editorial expectations, especially for authors published by international

presses — that are largely absent from spontaneous speech. This divergence raises questions about the audience for Nigerian literary writing. If the primary audience is international, the use of SBE idioms may be a concession to non-Nigerian readers. If the primary audience is Nigerian, the continued use of SBE idioms that Nigerians do not actually use in speech may represent a form of linguistic conservatism that is out of step with contemporary usage. Younger writers may be moving away from this pattern, but data from very recent publications would be needed to test this hypothesis.

Implications for Teaching Methodology. The frequency gap between deeply embedded NIL idioms and loosely embedded SBE idioms sheds light on the teaching methodology issue raised in the introduction. Idioms are best learnt and usage skills acquired when taught alongside the culture in which the idiom is rooted. Nigerian schools, however, continue to teach idioms through rote memorisation, isolated from context and divorced from the cultural life of the people who originally created them. This approach produces learners who can define "spill the beans" on an examination paper but have never heard anyone use it in a real conversation. Meanwhile, these same learners acquire "put leg," "in state," and "long throat" organically — by participating in weddings, listening to comedians, and growing up in Nigerian homes.

The implication is not that SBE idioms should be abandoned. Rather, it is that the current pedagogical approach is failing. If educators want Nigerian students to command a full range of English idioms — both SBE and NIL — they must teach idioms in a cultural context. They must acknowledge that many SBE idioms are foreign to Nigerian experience and therefore require explicit cultural grounding. And they must recognize that NIL idioms are not "errors" or "interferences" but legitimate features of NE that deserve a place in the curriculum. This finding corroborates the work of Irujo (1986a, 1986b, 1993) and Boers (2011, 2020) on the importance of cultural context in idiom instruction, while extending it to the specific situation of NE.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions.

First, to the Compositional Theory (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989), it adds the concept of cultural analysability. An idiom may be compositionally transparent (like "put leg") yet still be inaccessible to a speaker who lacks the cultural frame. Conversely, an idiom may be compositionally opaque (like "kick the bucket") yet still be learnable if taught in cultural context. What matters for vitality is not just internal linguistic structure but external cultural anchoring.

Second, to the sociolinguistics of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Bamgbose, 1995), it provides empirical evidence from spontaneous speech — not just literary texts or elicited data — of how nativization operates at the idiomatic level. The MCs, wedding hosts, and comedians in this study are not performing nativization. They are living it. Their language choices reflect not conscious decisions to indigenise English but the natural outcome of using English as a Nigerian.

Third, to second language idiom acquisition research (Irujo, 1986a, 1986b, 1993; Boers, 2011, 2020), it demonstrates that the distinction between L1 and L2 idiom processing is insufficient to account for the situation in multilingual societies like Nigeria. Many Nigerian speakers are not processing NE idioms as L2 learners processing SBE idioms. They are processing NE idioms as native speakers of a nativised variety. The cognitive and cultural frames they bring to idiom comprehension are Nigerian frames, not British frames. Pedagogy must reflect this reality.

Limitations

This study has limitations. The data were collected exclusively within the Lagos metropolis, which is cosmopolitan but not representative of all Nigerian speech communities. Future research should extend to other regions, including the North and South-South, to determine whether the patterns observed here hold across Nigeria. Additionally, the study focused on public events where speakers are performing for audiences. Private conversations among family and friends may show different patterns of idiom use. Finally, the study did not experimentally test comprehension or processing speed. It is possible that some SBE idioms are understood perfectly well by Nigerian audiences even if they are rarely produced. Future research should investigate the receptive knowledge of SBE idioms alongside productive use.

Implications

The implications of this study are theoretical, pedagogical, and lexicographic.

Theoretical Implications. This study extends the Compositional Theory (Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989) by introducing the concept of cultural analysability. An idiom may be linguistically decomposable yet culturally opaque to a speaker who lacks the relevant cultural frame. Conversely, an idiom may be linguistically opaque yet culturally accessible if the cultural frame is shared. Vitality depends on both. This study also contributes to the sociolinguistics of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Bamgbose, 1995) by providing empirical evidence from spontaneous speech — not just literary texts or elicited data — of how nativisation operates at the idiomatic level.

Pedagogical Implications. The finding that SBE idioms without cultural anchoring are rarely used in spontaneous speech, despite being taught in schools, calls for a fundamental rethinking of idiom instruction in Nigeria. Idioms are best learnt when taught alongside the culture in which they are rooted. Current pedagogical practice — rote memorisation, decontextualised lists, and a near-exclusive focus on SBE idioms — is failing. Teachers should incorporate NIL idioms into the curriculum, teach idioms in cultural context, and acknowledge that NE is a distinct variety with its own norms of appropriateness, not a deficient version of SBE.

Lexicographic Implications. Dictionaries of Nigerian English, such as Igboanusi (2001), should expand their coverage of deeply embedded NIL idioms. The present study identified dozens of such idioms in active use at social events — "put leg," "in state," "long throat," "wash brain," "see road," "pour libation," and many others — that deserve entry in any comprehensive dictionary of NE. Current dictionaries tend to under-represent the idiomatic richness of one word everyday speech, privileging written and literary sources over spoken data.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should extend beyond the Lagos metropolis to other regions of Nigeria, including the North and South-South, to determine

whether the patterns observed here hold across the country. While SBE idioms appear less in speech, they appear in literary texts. Further investigation into whether audiences understand SBE idioms better than they use them would add depth to the future studies of comedic language. Researchers should also investigate private conversations, not just public events, to capture idiom use in informal settings. Experimental studies measuring comprehension speed and processing of deeply embedded versus loosely embedded idioms would test the claim that cultural analysability facilitates processing. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking idiom use across generations would reveal whether the vitality of NIL idioms is increasing or decreasing over time.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the idioms which survive and thrive in Nigerian English are not those imported from outside and taught through pedantic classroom methods. They are the ones whose meanings are rooted in the languages, cultures, and social practices of the Nigerian people. The MC at a wedding who says "He has put leg" is not making an error. He is speaking Nigerian English at its most vital — drawing on shared cultural knowledge, building social bonds, and deploying rhetorical force that no SBE idiom could match. Charity begins at home. And in Nigerian English, so does the ability to speak idiomatically.

References

- Adegbija, E. (2003). Idiomatic variation in Nigerian English. In P. Lucko, L. Peter, & H. G. Wolf (Eds.), *Studies in African varieties of English* (pp. 41-56). Peter Lang.
- Adekunle, A. (1974). The standard Nigerian English. *JNESA*, 6(1), 24-37.
- Adetugbo, A. (1977). Nigerian English: Fact or fiction? *Lagos Notes and Records*, 6, 128-141.
- Adetugbo, A. (1979). Appropriateness and Nigerian English. In E. Ubahakwe (Ed.), *Varieties and functions of English in Nigeria*. African Universities Press.

- Bamgbose, A. (1995). *New Englishes: A West African perspective*. Monuro.
- Banjo, L. A. (1971). Standards of correctness in Nigerian English. *West African Journal of Education*, 15(12), 123-127.
- Boers, F. (2011). Cognitive semantic ways of teaching figurative phrases: A review of —research. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 9(1), 227-261.
- Boers, F. (2020). Factors affecting the learning of multiword items. In S. Webb (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of vocabulary studies* (pp. 143-157). Routledge.
- Cacciari, C. (1993). The place of idioms in a literal and metaphoric world. In C. Cacciari (Ed.), *Idioms: Processing, structure and interpretation* (pp. 27-56). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cacciari, C., & Glucksberg, S. (1991). Understanding idiomatic expressions: The —contribution of word meanings. In G. B. Simpson (Ed.), *Understanding word and sentence* (pp. 217-240). North-Holland.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1984). Literary meaning and psychological theory. *Cognitive Science*, 8, 275- 304.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1993). Why idioms are not dead metaphors. In C. Cacciari (Ed.), *Idioms: Processing, structure and interpretation* (pp. 57-77). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Gibbs, R. W., Nayak, N., & Cutting, C. (1989). How to kick the bucket and not decompose: Analyzability and idiom processing. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 28, 576-593.
- Glucksberg, S. (1993). Idiom meanings and allusional context. In C. Cacciari (Ed.), *Idioms: Processing, structure and interpretation* (pp. 3-26). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings* (pp. 269-293). Penguin.
- Igboanusi, H. (2001). *A Dictionary of Nigerian English*. Sambooks Publishers.
- Irujo, S. (1986a). Don't put your Leg in your Mouth: Transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(2), 287-304.
- Irujo, S. (1986b). A Piece of Cake: Learning and Teaching Idioms. *ELT Journal*, 40(3), 236- 242.

- Irujo, S. (1993). Steering Clear: Avoidance in the Production of Idioms. *IRAL*, 31(3), 205- 219.
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures* (2nd ed.). University of Illinois Press.
- Kachru, B. B. (2005). *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2015). *Where Metaphors Come from: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*. Oxford University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
- Makkai, A. (1972). *Idiom Structure in English*. Mouton.
- Mesthrie, R., & Bhatt, R. M. (2008). *World Englishes: The Study of New Linguistic Varieties*. Cambridge University Press.
- Okoro, O. (2004a). Codifying Nigerian English: Some practical problems of labelling. In S. Awonusi & E. A. Babalola (Eds.), *The Domestication of English in Nigeria: A festschrift in honour of Abiodun Adetugbo*. University of Lagos Press.
- Okoro, O. (2004b). The Identification of Standard Nigerian English Usage. In A. B. K. Dadzie & S. Awonusi (Eds.), *Nigerian English: Influences and Characteristics*. Sam Iroanusi Publications.
- Sharifian, F. (2017). *Cultural Linguistics: Cultural Conceptualisations and Language*. John Benjamins.